

# **An Orphaned Rancher For A Hopeful Bride**

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A Clean Western Historical Romance Novel

Daphne Barnes

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Chapter 1

## **Copyright**

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**A**s she made her way through the busy streets of New York City, down a route she'd traveled many times before, Lilly Summers couldn't help but shiver.

The sun shone high in the sky above her, but the ocean brought with it a cold eastern wind that cut through her clothes and left goosebumps across her flesh.

She knew the eastern side of the city well—after all, she had spent her early years living in a house not far from the Cassons', so she was familiar with their neighborhood.

Years later, it felt strange to return as a visitor, and as she walked toward the Casson house, she couldn't help but feel somewhat like an interloper, treading where she no longer belonged.

As she walked the streets, she couldn't help but flinch if someone looked at her for too long—did they know she was only a passerby? Did they know she couldn't dream of living in one of these homes now?

Mrs. Casson opened the door to her with a bright smile and quickly ushered her inside. From the depths of the house, Lilly could hear

the giggles of the two eldest Casson children, and the wailing of the youngest—a newborn named Josephine.

“Lilly, darling! It’s so wonderful to see you again, and you’ve brought the shirts with you! How marvelous. Why don’t you come in, come on.”

Lilly stepped inside and handed the package over to Mrs. Casson before following her into the kitchen. She had worked for Mrs. Casson for close to a year now, mending and altering clothes for her family, and in that time, the two had developed a close friendship.

Lilly hardly spoke to most of the other people she worked for, past dropping clothes off for them with a warm smile in exchange for payment.

Whenever it came time to make a trip to the Casson house, though, Lilly would make sure not to plan any other events—she could end up spending her whole day with the family, chatting to Mrs. Casson over a hot cup of tea, or chasing the children around the backyard.

“Oh, look at that...” Mrs. Casson cooed, unwrapping the package with tender care. “Those shirts look as good as new, Lilly! Oh, Mr. Casson will be so pleased.”

Before Lilly could respond, she heard the floorboards above them creak loudly, and then two sets of footsteps thundered toward the staircase. The Casson children must have heard the door open, and were now racing to meet their new guest.

It didn’t take long for them to run into the kitchen, where they skidded to a halt in front of Lilly and their mother.

“Lilly!” Elizabeth, the eldest daughter, threw herself at Lilly’s legs with a giggle. “Did you come to play with us?”

Margaret, the middle child of the Casson family, certainly didn’t want to be excluded from any fun, and Lilly quickly found herself rooted to the spot with a child wrapped firmly around either leg.

She couldn’t help but laugh as she looked down at the two girls, who were both beaming up at her with wide, toothy grins.

“Hello, girls, have you missed me?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” they chorused eagerly, tugging at her skirts. Their excitement was infectious, and Lilly couldn’t help but join in with their laughter.

There was something so pure and innocent about their joy, and it entranced her. She dropped down onto a crouch and wrapped her arms around the two girls, bringing them in for a tight hug.

“Well, I’ve missed you, too!” she assured them. “How have you been since I last saw you, hm? I think you’ve both grown about half a foot each since I was last here.”

“My tooth is all loose!” Elizabeth grinned, and poked her tongue against one of her front teeth to wiggle it as proof.

“Mama says it’ll come out soon, and then I’ll grow in big proper teeth like her and Papa.”

“Is that so?” Lilly pinched her cheek. “My, you’re all grown up now, aren’t you?”

“I’ll be nine next month!” the girl said proudly. “Mama says I’m a



young *lady* now!”

“Mmh,” Mrs. Casson hummed in agreement from where she was still examining the shirts at the dinner table. “A precocious young lady, that’s for certain.

“Now, why don’t you two run upstairs and keep playing, hm? You can leave Lilly and I to talk for a while, and then I’m sure in a little while she’ll come play with you both.”

The two girls looked a little upset to learn that Lilly wasn’t in fact there to see them, but they both agreed somewhat reluctantly to let the two women talk in private.

Lilly watched as they raced back out of the kitchen, and smiled to herself as she heard their footsteps on the floor above.

“They’re such sweet girls, Mrs. Casson. You’re very blessed.”

“I am indeed.” The older woman smiled gently, folding her freshly mended shirts. “You’ve done another wonderful job here, Lilly, let me just get you the money. Take a seat.”

Lilly slid into one of the available chairs around the kitchen table while Mrs. Casson fetched the payment for her.

“I’m glad you’re happy with them. Do you have any other work that needs to be done?”

“Oh, there’s a dress that needs rehemming, but that can wait.”

Mrs. Casson handed over her payment for the shirts, but as she pressed the coins into Lilly’s hands, she froze.

“Oh my, dear child! Look at your poor hands!”

“My hands?”

Mrs. Casson forgot about the money for a moment and grabbed both of Lilly’s hands in her own, bringing them closer to inspect them properly. She twisted them this way and that, frowning.

“Look at these marks and scratches all over your hands, darling. What on earth have you been doing?”

“Oh!” Lilly smiled at the woman’s concern and gently pulled her hands from Mrs. Casson’s grasp.

Over the years she’d worked sewing shirts and mending clothes for wealthier women, she’d grown so used to the prick of a needle against her fingertip that she hardly even noticed them anymore.

Her hands were, of course, covered in scrapes and scratches that she’d gained over the course of her work, and while they were a familiar sight for her, they must have surprised poor Mrs. Casson.

“It’s nothing. It’s just the price I pay for working with needles, I suppose. I know I should be more careful, but sometimes when I’m working quickly it’s hard not to prick my fingers.”

Mrs. Casson’s face crumpled as she looked at Lilly, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Well, that settles it. I was of two minds whether or not to give you this, but now that I’ve seen the state of those poor hands of yours—well, I’ve got no choice, do I?”

*What on earth is she talking about,* Lilly wondered, blinking up at

the older woman in confusion. “Mrs. Casson, I—”

“Look at your hands. Those aren’t the hands of a young lady, are they?” Mrs. Casson pushed her chair out and disappeared from the kitchen for a few moments.

Lilly heard her bustling about in the parlor before she reappeared with something in her hands. It looked like a newspaper.

“It’s not right.”

Lilly looked down at her hands once more, frowning. If she was honest, she’d never really thought of the pinpricks and scrapes that marked her pale skin to be much more than an inconvenience.

She had always counted herself lucky that she had learned to sew—it had kept her from working in one of the more dangerous factories in the south of the city, or even worse, selling herself the way some young women were forced to.

If Lilly had to endure a few pinpricks to save herself from that fate, then so be it.

But Mrs. Casson didn’t seem to see things the same way. As she took the seat across from Lilly again and unfolded the paper on the table, she let out a weary sigh.

“May I ask you a personal question, Lilly?”

“Of course.”

“You’re so good with my girls, I’ve always wondered... Do you wish you had children of your own?”

Lilly was taken aback by the question. No one had ever asked her anything like that before, and she'd never given it any real thought.

"Of course," she replied. "I thought everyone did."

Mrs. Casson chuckled at that, and shook her head. "Not everyone, my dear. For some, children and family are a matter of obligation, not love.

"Some have children because they feel it's what they should do, not what they want to do. But... would I be right in saying you are one of those who *wants* a family?"

"You would, yes," Lilly admitted. Mrs. Casson's face broke into a smile at the news, and she pushed the newspaper slowly across the table.

"I hoped you would say that. Seeing how patient and happy you are with my girls, I've always thought this isn't the kind of life you should be leading—if you don't mind my saying so, of course."

"What's this?" Lilly asked, looking down at the newspaper. It was from yesterday, and was already creased from where Mrs. Casson or her husband had leafed through it.

"Look at the back," the older woman suggested gently.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lilly could see Mrs. Casson was watching her closely, even leaning in a little like she was trying to gauge Lilly's reaction.

"At the advertisements," she added.

Lilly did as instructed and turned to the back page of the newspaper to see columns and columns of advertisements. It took her a few moments to realize what she was looking at as she scanned the page, until she saw an invitation at the bottom of the letter.

*If you, like so many others, are plagued by the heartache of loneliness, then send a letter with your details to the following address.*

She'd heard of these advertisements before. It was a matchmaking service, offered by several small companies out West promising to match young women from the East Coast with the men who'd traveled across the country to seek fortune and prosperity.

On the page in front of her were advertisements by both men and women seeking companionship—men who'd grown lonely in the goldmines and ranch fields, and women who were still feeling the effects of the Recent Unpleasantness.

Despite how badly she wanted a family, Lilly had never considered sending a letter to such an agency. She wasn't sure why the idea had never appealed to her before, but there was something about it that had always made her somewhat uneasy.

Frowning, she looked up at Mrs. Casson. "It's very kind of you to think of me, Ma'am, but—"

"But what?"

Lilly paused and let out a gentle sigh. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

The older woman laughed and tilted her head to one side, as if she was explaining something very simple to a child.

“I’m sure you’ll be able to figure that out for yourself, Lilly. That’s half the fun, isn’t it?”

Lilly opened her mouth to protest, but before she could, Mrs. Casson reminded her of just how busy she was, and with two young children she couldn’t afford to waste time chatting.

“Thank you for the shirts, they’re as wonderful as always. Now, why don’t you run on home, dear, before it gets dark.”

With that, Lilly was all but shooed out of the door like a stray cat, with her wages in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

As the door to the Casson house closed behind her, she looked down at the newspaper once more and shook her head slowly. Was Mrs. Casson suggesting that she advertise herself in the back pages of a newspaper like these poor, lonely folks?

*I’m a homely woman of 34, seeking the companionship of a good Christian man out West. I’m a skilled cook, and have taken care of plenty of children in my life. I do not need a man of riches, but I would prefer a man well established in his career.*

*26-year-old bachelor seeking a woman of 18 to 23, willing to move to California. Living in a small mining community is a lonely life with long days, and I’m hoping to be introduced to a young woman willing to add some warmth and brightness to my home.*

The adverts continued like that down the page. They all sounded so hopeless, seeking out companionship and the kindness of strangers, and Lilly couldn’t help but feel pity for them. The country never felt larger than when folks were spread out like this.

Lilly made her way home with the newspaper tucked underneath

her arm, and as she passed through the narrow back streets, she found herself growing ever more aware of it.

The paper weighed almost nothing, and yet the longer she walked, the harder it was to forget its presence. By the time she walked through the front door, it was all she could think about.

She threw the paper down on the small table in her kitchen, which was tucked up against the far wall, and watched as it skidded along the chipped surface.

It had fallen with the back page—the advertisements—facing upwards, and as she looked at it, Lilly almost felt the invitation at the bottom was calling out to her, drawing her in closer.

Or perhaps it was taunting her.

*If you, like so many others, are plagued by the heartache of loneliness, then send a letter with your details to the following address.*

She had always pitied the women who felt they had no other choice but to write to these sorts of companies—the widowed, the unattractive, the unwanted.

She had always thought of them the same way many of her employers must have thought of *her*: as a poor unfortunate soul, whose life was depressing to even think about. And yet, there she stood, just like those other women who had used this service before her.

She really was no different to them, if she was honest. Just like them, she was in need of a husband, and just like them, she had no other option but to use the advertisement.

*What harm could writing a simple letter do me?* she thought, taking a seat at the dining table.

If she sent in a short description of herself, the worst that could happen would be that no one would want her. Then she would be in a situation no different from the one she already found herself in.

And, of course, if she sent a letter in, then there was a chance—just a small chance, of course—that she would take someone's fancy, and they would write a letter in return.

If that were to happen, then perhaps she would even be lucky enough to leave this place and start a family of her own like Mrs. Casson had.

She looked up from the newspaper slowly and gazed around her apartment with a wrinkled nose. It was not, by any means, the kind of home she had dreamed of for herself.

It was a small apartment, not like the luxurious abodes that some in the city owned. Her whole apartment could probably fit into the primary suite of one of those sprawling homes that she often walked past.

There was a cramped kitchen for her to use, but with the table there was hardly enough room to stand. She had a small bathroom, a tiny windowless bedroom, and what she supposed constituted as a lounge, although it was devoid of anything but an old armchair.

The whole place only had two windows—one small rectangular window that had been painted shut and hung over the sink, and a window that looked out at the building next door.



There was hardly any light in the place, and that only made it feel even more claustrophobic. It wasn't ideal, but it was all she could afford.

She hadn't always lived like this, in such a miserable excuse for a house. There had been a time when she'd lived somewhere lovely, somewhere warm and inviting.

It seemed like so long ago now, but she had lived, at one point in her life, in a real home with a family of her own.

Her mother and father, although not rich people by any means, had made sure she always had a place to rest her head, walls and a roof to shelter her from the weather, and a place filled with love.

Back in those days, she never would have dreamed of settling for a place like *this* as her home, but that life she had loved so dearly was gone, and this was all she had in its place.

Lilly frowned, wrinkling her nose at the sight of the apartment. Over the time she'd lived here, she'd grown accustomed to the sight of it, and on a day-to-day basis, she almost seemed to forget what her surroundings truly looked like.

Now that she was *really* looking at it, though, taking in every little detail of it, she had to admit to herself that this wasn't the life she wanted.

She wanted a home, someplace where she could raise children of her own and have a family like she had done years ago.

She wanted somewhere warm and inviting, somewhere full of love and happiness. This place was cold, dark, and lonely. There was no love here.

Lilly looked down at the newspaper again before standing up to fetch a pad of paper and her pencils. She sat back down at the table with a determined huff and trapped the pencil between her teeth as she thought about how to open the letter.

How did she want to introduce herself?

*I am a twenty-year-old woman living in New York City, hoping for the companionship of a young gentleman,* she began, craning over the table to write. After only managing a single sentence, though, she stopped and set her pencil down, sighing.

“What am I supposed to say?” she wondered aloud. It wasn’t as though she came from a well-to-do family and could boast of her connections.

She didn’t have money or status to offer, and had very few skills aside from her sewing. How was she supposed to make a good impression?

Her gaze fell on the newspaper again, and with a low hum, she reached over to pick it up, looking at the adverts that had already been placed by others.

Perhaps she would be able to find some inspiration within these pages.

**I**t was another hot, tireless day on the ranch, just as almost every other day was. The sun was at its peak in the sky and beat down on the back of Daniel Whitby's neck as he worked; under the brim of his hat, he could feel sweat beading against his skin.

Taking a moment's break, he dropped his hammer on the ground beside him, pushed his hat back, and wiped his forehead on the back of his arm before continuing where he had stopped.

The boundary fences needed repairing once more. It seemed like he found himself out on the outskirts of the ranch every other week, knocking another fence post back into place or hammering another board to try and keep the boundary secure.

It wasn't as though he *minded*, necessarily, he just wished that Abel didn't send him out to do it in the hottest hours of the day.

Daniel hefted the hammer in his hand, lining it up to take another swing at the plank, when he heard rustling behind him and turned to see a familiar figure approaching, until she stood right over him.

With a wide-brimmed hat perched on top of her head, she briefly blocked out the sun. "Hard at work?" she asked.

Daniel smiled gently and sat back on his haunches, dropping the hammer again. "I always am, Jill."

She hummed in agreement, holding up a hand to shield her eyes so she could look out over the ranch. Collins Ranch spread out over hundreds of acres of rolling fields that stretched toward the horizon, and was an impressive sight.

In the distance, Daniel could see one of the ranch hands leading the cattle out to graze, and if he paused for a moment, he'd be able to hear the sound of men working the crops to his left.

"What brings you out here in the middle of the day, anyway?" he asked Jill, motioning to the fence behind him. "Are you plannin' on working?"

She snorted at that. "The only thing I'll use that hammer on is you, and you know it."

Daniel thought about it for a moment, looking Jill up and down. If he was honest, it probably *was* safer for her not to have a hammer in hand—she'd be a danger to herself, and more importantly, to him.

"Good point. So, what *do* you want?"

"Just to talk." She leaned against the section of fencing that Daniel had only just repaired, and he winced involuntarily.

The wood creaked a little under her weight, but thankfully, it stayed up. He never would have heard the end of it if it had given out underneath her.

"What about?"

“You *know* what about.” Jill shot him a pointed look. “The same thing as always.”

Daniel pursed his lips, his expression souring as he met Jill’s gaze. This wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have with her; it never was. “Not you, too...”

“Yes, me too.” Jill crouched beside him as Daniel picked up the hammer again. “Don’t ignore me.”

“I don’t want to talk about this, Jill.”

“Well, you’re going to have to at *some* point. And if it’s not with me, it’ll be with Abel. He was talking to me about it at breakfast again, once you’d left for work.”

Daniel scowled down at a patch of dried grass by his feet, feeling his stomach churn. It felt like he had to have this conversation almost as often as he had to repair the fence.

Every few weeks, Abel would bring up this same topic, and Daniel would squirm uncomfortably in his seat until he could escape.

“You know it’s time, Daniel,” Jill said gently. “You can’t be alone forever. Abel’s right about this; it’s time you tried to find yourself a wife.”

Daniel gritted his teeth at the word *wife*. It was still a sore subject, and felt jarring to even discuss.

“No, Jill. How many times am I gonna have to make my point clear? I can’t do that. You *know* I can’t.”

There was an edge to his tone that few people would have taken

kindly to, but when Daniel glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, Jill didn't seem offended. She had known him long enough, after all, to know that he meant nothing by it. In fact, she probably knew Daniel better than any other soul could hope to.

She was the closest thing to a sister Daniel had ever had. Abel had taken them both in over the years—Daniel as a baby, and Jill as a teenager after her parents had been killed in a fire.

She had been fourteen when they had met, and Daniel had been twelve, although he had likely looked much younger than that. He'd been a scrawny young thing, often called 'runt' by some of the ranch hands affectionately, and Jill had found him endearing.

Over the years, she had told him of the intense maternal instinct she'd felt when she laid eyes on him for the first time, and it seemed as though that instinct had never really faded.

Jill still treated him the same as she had done when they were children; sometimes playing the role of elder sister, occasionally bordering on the role of long-suffering mother.

She still scolded him if he drank too much with the ranch hands, or clipped him on the ear when he hadn't washed up properly.

He would never forget the night he had returned from working in the fields and she had thrown a bucket over him, telling him that he ought to have been ashamed for tracking mud through the house.

Sometimes, they were on more equal footing, though. As they grew older, the two opened up about the circumstances that had first brought them to the ranch, staying up until the early hours of the morning going over their shared misfortunes.

Those hours, when it felt as though there was no one else awake, were the reason they knew each other so well, and the reason they trusted each other so deeply.

Perhaps those conversations were also the reason she didn't argue back when he snapped at her, and laid a gentle, comforting hand on his shoulder instead.

"You know not every woman in the world is like Missy, don't you?"

Daniel snorted and barely controlled the urge to roll his eyes at the mention of Missy Miller. He knew it wasn't the right thing to do, to speak ill of a young woman, but when it came to Missy, it was hard not to.

"Thank God. If every woman *was*, we'd be in trouble."

"I'm just pointing out to you, if you think all women are going to be just as downright insufferable as her—" Jill paused, and the two shared a brief smile.

"Well, I don't want her scaring you off women for good."

Daniel bristled at that, and the smile slid from his features. "I'm not afraid of women."

"Are you just afraid of the idea of marrying one, then?"

He opened his mouth quickly, ready to snap a retort at Jill, but when he met her gaze, whatever he was about to say simply died on his lips.

Jill frowned sympathetically and cocked her head to one side. "You

can't lie to me Daniel, not after all these years. I *know* you, and more importantly, I know why you're afraid.

"I understand, and it's not something you should be ashamed of. Lord knows anyone else in your situation would be just as nervous."

She leaned in a little closer. "But how long are you going to let fear keep you from being happy, Daniel?"



The sun was low on the horizon by the time Daniel finished his work and made his way back to the main house.

Even as the sky around him began to darken, the air still felt almost unbearably hot, so before he retired for the evening he went to the stables to find some water.

There was often a spare bucket of fresh water from the nearby well left out so the ranch hands could wash up.

He took a few moments to clean himself off, splashing water up his forearms and across the back of his neck. The water was freezing compared to the hot, humid air around him, and gave some much-needed relief as it trickled down his back.

For a few moments, Daniel stood over the bucket with his eyes closed, debating whether it would be worth just dunking his head below the surface.

Before he could decide, though, he heard someone calling his name. "Daniel! Come here."

He opened his eyes and turned to see Abel Collins, the owner of

the ranch, standing in the doorway. The older man had his hat in one hand and was using it to swat away flies lazily, leaning against the wooden frame of the door as he did so.

Even from across the barn, Daniel could see a warm smile playing at Abel's lips.

"Evenin', sir."

"You're done for the day?"

"Yessir."

"Good." Abel beckoned him closer with one hand. "Join me in my office, would you?"

As a boy, Daniel had often spent his days shadowing the ranch hands. It had fascinated him to see how the men worked, and to see the way Abel treated them.

He'd learned from a young age that while Abel treated all his employees with respect, it was only a select few that were trusted enough to accompany him to his office in an evening. That was where business was conducted, where plans were made.

When he was a child, Daniel had often sat outside the door to Abel's office in wonder, hoping that one day *he* would be one of those men.

Years had gone by, and as Daniel had grown from a scrawny young thing into a man, those hours spent following ranch hands had paid off. He knew the ranch like the back of his hand, and even as a teenager Abel seemed to view him as a trusted member of the team.

Now it seemed like most nights Daniel would be invited back to the office so they could talk about business.

Daniel wiped his hands down on the front of his shirt as he followed Abel into the office, and as they walked inside, he cleared his throat.

There was always a lot to discuss about the ranch—running an operation as large as Abel’s meant there were often multiple projects going at the same time, and on most nights the older man would want to throw around ideas for future plans.

Recently, though, there was one business plan in particular that they kept coming back to, over and over again.

It was Daniel’s idea to expand their cattle ranching, and it involved partnering with a nearby cattle farmer named McCarthy, who often had good stock.

“I’m thinking I’ll take another look at those cattle this weekend, Abel. There’s no sense in bringing them here until they’re old enough, or we’ll risk injuring them on the journey.

“If they’re growing as well as McCarthy’s been tellin’ me, then they should be ready to move out in about—”

“Daniel,” Abel interrupted him gently. “That’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Abel was not a man to raise his voice, and he never had been. He always spoke with the same soft tone, no matter the situation, and it always seemed to work.

No matter how fierce an argument, how angry the other person

was, there was something about Abel that made men listen to him.

Daniel was no exception. He stopped talking immediately and looked over at Abel with an eyebrow cocked. "Yes, sir?"

"I'm not here to talk about cattle tonight."

"Oh." Daniel slumped back in his chair, a little disheartened.

McCarthy's cattle would be the first major purchase he had lobbied for at the ranch, and he was eager to see the deal through as quickly as possible, with no mistakes.

"What did you want to talk about, then? The fences are all fixed up on the west boundary, so there's nothing to worry about there."

"I didn't want to talk about the *ranch*, Daniel." Abel tilted his head to one side, still smiling gently. "I wanted to talk about you, actually."

Daniel felt his heart sink at the words, because he knew exactly what the older man meant: he wanted to talk about finding Daniel a wife.

How did he always seem to end up back at this conversation, over and over again?

He'd already spoken to Jill about it once today, and that was more than enough for him without Abel bringing it up again.

"Would you be interested in meeting with a young woman?" Abel asked, leaning back in his chair slowly. "If I knew of a girl who would want to meet with *you*?"

Daniel's heart sped up at that. The thought that perhaps there would be a woman willing to meet him, a woman who would be interested in him... that was exciting, intoxicating.

But it was also terrifying. What if it was a mistake?

Abel must have seen the conflict on the younger man's face, because when he spoke, it was almost as one would talk to a child—soothing and comforting.

“Every time we talk about this, you get that same look in your eyes, boy. Like a mare if you sneak up on her—ready to bolt at any moment. You look scared out of your mind at the mere thought of marriage.”

Daniel opened his mouth to protest, ready to insist that he wasn't scared at all, but he knew it would be a lie Abel would see straight through. So, he just closed it again silently, looking down at his hands.

He *was* scared. He was terrified that something might go wrong—and, knowing his luck, it would.

“What is it that scares you, son?” Abel asked.

Daniel looked up slowly and met the old man's gaze, into the same eyes that had shown him so much kindness over the years. He had to be honest with the man.

He looked down at his fingers again—it was easier to talk about this when he didn't have to look at Abel properly—and started picking out grime from under his fingernails.

“What if there's something wrong with me?”

Abel scoffed. "What on earth would be wrong with you?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "But there must be, right?"

"There must have been something she saw in me, something that made her walk away from me and leave me on your doorstep."

"This is about your mother?" Abel almost seemed surprised by that. "After all this time, are you still hurting from what happened to you?"

"She didn't want me." Daniel frowned, still picking the dirt out from under his nails. "And a mother is supposed to love her children no matter what, isn't she?"

"So she must have seen *something* in me, even as a baby, something that made her realize she could never love me. And if my own mother couldn't stay with me, then—"

"Now you stop that, son." Abel reached across the desk, tapping on the wood to get Daniel's attention.

He slowly looked up again into Abel's warm brown eyes, which were now clouded by concern. His brows were knitted together in a frown as he looked at Daniel, and for a moment Daniel himself felt a little guilty for worrying the man so.

"I'll hear no more talk like that out of you. Now, I can't tell you why your mother saw fit to leave you on my doorstep, I really can't.

"She must have had her reasons, but I can tell you honestly that it wasn't because there was no way of lovin' you. From the moment I saw you out on that porch, Daniel, I loved you as if you were my

own kin, and I've loved you ever since.

"Whatever reason your mother had for walkin' away, it wasn't because of *you*."

With that, Abel sat back in his chair once more, almost looking a little surprised by his own passion.

Although the two men had talked about the possibility of Daniel finding a wife, they had never once really discussed just why he was so resistant to the idea, not until tonight.

Abel wasn't his father, not by blood at least.

Although he'd taken Daniel in when he had been just a baby and raised him like his own son, the two had met completely by chance when he had walked out one morning to find Daniel on his porch, swaddled in old rags and half-starved.

Recently widowed himself, Abel had cradled the baby in his arms, kissed him on the forehead, and set about making sure he was healthy without a second thought. It was a story other ranch hands—and Abel himself—had told Daniel many times over the years.

He was grateful for Abel's kindness. If the old man hadn't picked him up from the porch and fed him, Daniel likely would have passed away like so many other unfortunate children.

But despite the man's kindness, despite the fact that Daniel regarded him as a father, there was nothing that could truly fix the wound his mother had made in his heart.

With all the love Abel had given him over the years, Daniel couldn't ignore the truth that his own mother had decided it would

be easier to abandon him.

And what if she wasn't the only one to decide that? What if the woman he married saw whatever it was in Daniel that had made his mother flee, and abandoned him also?

He wouldn't be able to handle that agony, and he knew it.

No, as lonely as it sometimes was, it was easier for Daniel to keep to himself. There was less chance of having his heart broken again.

"You're afraid of history repeating itself, are you?" Abel asked slowly. "That's the problem here, isn't it?"

"Yes," Daniel admitted. "What if I marry a girl, and then she doesn't want me either? What if she abandons me just like my mother did?"

"What if there's something *wrong* with me, Abel?"

The older man shook his head slowly, and rubbed a hand over his weather-beaten face. "Did I ever tell you much about when I was courting my late wife?"

"No, sir."

"Well, I wasn't the owner of this lovely ranch back then." He chuckled. "No, back in those days, this place was my daddy's, and I was much like you are now.

"I didn't have any money to my name, I had hardly any schooling, and one day, I happened to meet this beautiful young lady in town. She was like an angel, with long golden hair that shone like a halo and the most beautiful eyes you'd ever see."



It had been almost three decades since Abel's wife had passed in childbirth, but whenever the man spoke about her, he had the same look in his eyes that he had done when Daniel was just a boy.

His voice was always so warm and tender when he told stories about his wife, but there was so much pain in his eyes that it was difficult to look at. Years had gone by, but the heartbreak he had suffered from her death remained the same.

"She was a teacher in those days. She taught reading and writing, and I wasn't much good at either back then.

"I remember, there was a lawyer in town who'd taken a fancy to her—he lived in a big house to the north side of town, and he'd often bring her gifts and talk about books and poetry.

"Now, I could hardly read at all, let alone read the kinds of poetry he was talking to her about, and for the first time in my life, when I stood in that man's shadow, I felt inadequate. It wasn't a feeling I liked, I can tell you that."

Abel smiled across the table at Daniel for a moment before continuing. "When I was courting her, I had nothing to offer. No money, no education, no connections.

"The only thing I had to my family name was this ranch, and that was still going to be my daddy's for another few years. I couldn't afford to buy her gifts like that lawyer, and all I could give her was a bunch of wildflowers I picked myself.

"I remember my hands were sweating something fierce when I went to talk to her for the first time. I was so damn *scared* that she would laugh in my face and tell me to leave.

“But do you know what scared me even more?”

“No,” Daniel replied honestly.

“Not trying. I knew if I never tried to win her affections, she’d be swept up by another man. As terrified as I was back then, I knew I had to at least try. I didn’t want to be without her.”

Daniel nodded slowly. That wasn’t entirely unlike how he felt—while he was terrified that a woman he gave his heart to would abandon him, he was more afraid of being alone for the rest of his life.

It was exhausting to be caught between those two outcomes.

“I can understand that.”

“I thought you might.” Abel reached into one of the drawers in his desk and pulled out a folded newspaper.

“So, my question to you, son, is—are you going to let that fear stand in the way of your happiness? Are you going to let it rule over you?”

With that, he dropped the newspaper on the desk between them. Daniel picked it up and unfolded it, looking down to see an advertisement for a matchmaking service.

“What’s this?”

“An opportunity at finding a nice young girl for yourself,” Abel said. “Jill found it a few days ago, we thought perhaps it would be a good way for you to try and meet someone.

“There are plenty of girls out on the east coast looking to start new lives with strapping young men like yourself.”

“I’ve heard of this before,” he said quietly.

“Didn’t Johnny Weston meet his wife through something like this? She used to live out on the coast somewhere until he brought her here on the train.”

“It was something like that, yes.” Abel cleared his throat. “Now, if you’ll take a closer look at that page right in front of you, my boy, you might notice something.”

Daniel scanned down the page for anything that looked out of the ordinary and his gaze fell on one advert in particular, which had been circled.

“This one here? The... the young woman from New York City?”

“That’s the one. I think she sounds perfect for you, Daniel.” Abel smiled at him from across the desk.

“Now, I’m as patient as the next man, and I think everyone in town who’s met me will be able to tell you that.

“But I must tell you, I’m gettin’ weary of watchin’ you grow older each year, and seeing you so alone. I think it’s time you made a choice, son.”

“A choice?” Daniel looked up in surprise. Abel had never given him an ultimatum before, not like this, and the sudden pressure came as a shock.

“Whether you want to be alone,” he said, “or whether you’re

willin' to take a leap of faith.”

Several months had passed since Lilly had first applied to the matchmaking service. It had taken weeks for her to even hear a response back, and during those weeks, she'd waited nervously for any sign of a letter.

The advertisement had boasted high rates of success, but there had been no guarantee they would even find her a man, so while she waited, one thought kept coming back to her.

*What if there's no one out there for me?*

It had become a very real fear for her with each day that passed without a response from the agency. What if, among that pool of men who were in need of a fine young wife, they were completely unable to find even *one* to whom she appealed?

But then, out of the blue one Friday morning, she had received a handwritten letter from a young man out in Colorado, who'd seemed to take an interest in her. His name was Daniel.

He lived out on a ranch in what he described as a "dusty and modest town," but one that was "filled with the kindest folk I'll ever hope to meet." In his letter, he talked about what a day of

work would look like for him, and then asked questions of her.

What was it like to live in New York? What kind of work did she do? Did she *enjoy* that work?

His questions had left a smile on her face. It had been a long time since anyone had paid her much attention.

Of course, there was Mrs. Casson and a few of the *other* women she worked for, but there was always something that separated Lilly from them.

As much as she enjoyed their company, a conversation would always end with money changing hands, and she would be reminded that her relationship with them was, at least in part, a transactional one.

It wasn't like that with Daniel, though. He seemed genuinely interested in her, and excited to get to know her even better.

Lilly was more than happy to comply, and sat down to pen a response almost as soon as she had finished his letter. She answered all his questions the best she could, but paused at the third one, gnawing her lower lip.

He'd asked about her family.

It was a question Lilly should have anticipated, as it was a natural enough topic for Daniel to be curious about, but she'd felt her heart sink when she'd read the question on the page, nestled among all the others.

There had been some small, admittedly foolish part of her that had desperately wanted him not to ask at all.

She rarely spoke about her parents to anyone.

Of course, there were people in the city who knew what had happened to them; they were curious as to why a young girl such as herself would be living alone in New York, working to sustain herself with no support from her parents.

Mrs. Casson knew of the whole sorry affair, and Lilly had even gone so far as to tell her of the exact date she had lost both of her parents: March 18th.

The woman had been kind enough to allow her the day off from working on her blouses, so that Lilly could visit their gravesite.

But besides those few scattered conversations, it was still too difficult for Lilly to talk about her parents in much detail, and so they only really existed now in the recesses of her memory.

Daniel was the first person in a long time that she had decided to tell about her family at all, and her hand shook noticeably when she gripped the pen to do it.

*I wish I could tell you that I live a wonderful life here in the city, with a kind, loving family. Truly, I wish I could, but if I were to do that, then it would be little more than a lie.*

*I do not wish to burden you with the difficulties and sadness of my life thus far, but as you asked after my parents, I suppose I ought to tell you.*

*My mother and father were both wonderful people, and I miss them dearly. Through my life, they showered me with love and showed kindness even to strangers that they happened to pass on the street.*

*Unfortunately, I lost them some years ago now, due to—*

Lilly stopped writing, blinking away the tears that blurred her vision. It still hurt to think about the fate her parents had met on that cool spring morning, before the sun had even crested the horizon.

Her father, always a hard worker who rose while the sky was still dark on most mornings, had been set upon by thieves, and her mother had been caught in the scuffle that followed.

Her father had taken the same early morning route to the bank each Friday morning, as the police had grimly informed Lilly later that day, and it was only to be assumed the thieves had been watching him for some time, waiting for him to make a deposit.

They had attacked him before he had even stepped from the threshold of the home, and killed her mother, too, all over a measly \$75. Somehow, that made it even worse.

In the blink of an eye, she had lost the two people she cared about most in the world and her entire life had changed—and to those thieves, it was only worth \$75.

With tears threatening to seal her throat shut, Lilly explained what had happened, skirting around some of the more unpleasant details as best she could.

After all, the last thing she wanted to do was to scare off a potential suitor before she had even really had the chance to get to know him.

It turned out that she didn't scare him off, though. Daniel replied to her within the week, answering the questions she had asked of



him and apologizing for bringing up the topic of her parents, given how painful it must have been for her to discuss.

In his letters, at least, he seemed kind. He was patient with her, and understanding when she apologized for not wanting to go into great detail about her family.

He seemed genuinely interested in learning more about her life as a seamstress, and although Lilly knew it might not be a great reflection of the kind of man he was in reality, she liked what she saw of him.

Despite that, Lilly hadn't really taken the time to consider whether she felt the two would be a good match for each other in real life.

While they exchanged their letters each week, she almost managed to forget about the reality of the situation; they were in fact courting, in the hopes of a marriage somewhere down the line.

For some reason, that didn't really feel like reality—when they couldn't see each other face to face, it was easy to forget.

That was, until they had been writing to each other for three months, almost to the day. That was when Lilly collected the letter on her way to deliver a fresh batch of blouses to Mrs. Casson's house, and recognized Daniel's handwriting on one of the envelopes.

Like always, she tore it open excitedly and paused in the doorway with her package tucked under one arm while she read.

At first, the letter seemed like all of his others. Daniel asked after her, he hoped she was well.

And then, about halfway through the letter, Lilly read the words that made her heart pound.

*I hope I do not seem so presumptuous or forceful in asking this of you, but I fear if I do not ask this burning question, another man will beat me to it. Will you do me the great honor of accepting my hand in marriage?*

She had to read it twice more to check that she hadn't made a mistake, but no, she hadn't. The words were there, clear as day.

Daniel wanted to marry her.

Lilly sank back against the door, letting out the breath she hadn't even realized she was holding in. As she clutched the letter, her heart pounded against her ribcage in a frenzied beat.

Daniel wanted to marry her.

There was a delivery of freshly sewn blouses to be made, and although she was normally never late, Lilly figured Mrs. Casson would be able to forgive her just once.

Rather than heading on her way with the package in one hand and the letter in the other, Lilly turned back to her apartment and placed the box of shirts down on the table, smiling to herself.

*I'll head down a little later*, she told herself, staring at Daniel's letter. Right now, this was more important—how could she concentrate on work of any sort with this proposal on her mind?

Lilly pulled out the pad of paper and pencil once more and settled in to write her response to Daniel. As she touched the pencil down against the page, she sucked in a deep breath and held it there for

a moment, uncertain of what to do next.

She could feel her heart beating like a marching drum in her chest, could hear the blood rushing in her ears, and when she looked down at her hand, she realized it was trembling with excitement.

Over the years, Lilly had learned to handle heartbreak better than anyone else she knew. She had been forced into a situation she could never have imagined for herself as a young girl, and she had adapted to it.

It may not have been *her* choice to live this way—alone, in a tiny, depressing apartment in a crime-ridden area of the city—but it was what she had needed to do in order to survive.

Survival also meant that she had stopped allowing herself to dream of a day when she would have a family of her own.

It was too difficult to let her mind wander and indulge in the fantasy of a perfect life with a husband and children, only to be brought back to the cold reality of her life.

No, she'd learned long ago that it was easier to push any illusions of a family to the darkest recesses of her mind. She couldn't afford to think about the *possibility* of a future family, not when she needed to concentrate on making it through each day as it came.

But now, it wasn't a faint, far-off dream that she'd concocted. She wasn't curled up in bed late at night with the sheets pulled up to her chin, listening to the sounds of the city around her while she imagined what her life *could* be like.

She wasn't thinking about a fairytale prince who might sweep her off her feet.

This was real. Daniel was that fairytale prince, he was the daydream that pulled her out of her tiny apartment for a few moments of respite.

Only with Daniel, there would be no cold return to reality, because he *was* reality. And he wanted to marry her.

All of a sudden, the possibility of having a family once again didn't seem like such an outrageous possibility. All of the warmth and love Lilly had convinced herself she would never see again was all just within arm's reach once more.

Daniel was offering her that, in Colorado on the ranch where he lived.

Of course, the idea still seemed like pure insanity to her. If she said yes, she would be marrying a complete stranger, leaving the only life she'd ever known to travel across the country—and what if it went wrong?

What if Daniel wasn't the same kind, charming man he seemed in his letters? What if he didn't like her when they met, and he changed his mind about the whole affair—what then?

If that happened, she would be left with nothing.

But as she looked around her apartment, up into the tiny window that hardly let in any light at all, Lilly realized she didn't have much more than *nothing* right now.

It would be a gamble, accepting this proposal. It would be a leap of faith.

But perhaps a leap of faith was what she needed.

**I** *accept your proposal most graciously.*

The words made Daniel dizzy to look at. He'd read Lilly's response so many times now, over and over again until the words were burned into his mind.

She had accepted his proposal. She wanted to marry him, and travel out to Colorado.

She wanted *him*.

Since he and Lilly had started their correspondence a few weeks earlier, Daniel had been the one to collect the mail.

At the sight of the delivery pulling up to the ranch, he would be the one to leap up from the breakfast table and rush outside, snatching the letters out of the poor mailman's grasp. He'd flick through them with shaky hands, searching for one familiar cursive in particular.

In the weeks since they had begun writing to each other, Daniel had read and reread Lilly's letters so many times that he had memorized every swoop and curve of her writing.

It was the only thing he knew of her, other than the rather vague description she had provided in her first letter. He didn't know her face, but he *did* know the slant of her lettering, and the flourish with which she wrote the tails of her g's, j's and y's.

It took eight days for Daniel to receive a response once he proposed to Lilly, and they were the most agonizing eight days of his life.

He knew, logically, that it would take time for the letter to be delivered to New York, then she would need to make her decision, and then it would take even more time for the response to arrive, but that didn't stop him from waiting desperately every day.

Waiting for Lilly's response became an obsession. It was all he could think about as he worked, or ate, or tried to sleep late at night.

No matter how tired his body was after a long day out in the fields, his mind would still race as he went over all of the possibilities.

What if his letter was misplaced and she never received it? What if she decided against marrying him? What if someone in New York had begun courting her?

In the week that he waited for her letter, Daniel's dreams were plagued with all of his (many) worries. He would dream of a faceless woman who could only be Lilly, tearing a letter into tiny shreds before throwing them in his face.

He heard a baby screaming in the distance, but no matter how hard he searched for the child in his dreams, he would never be able to find it.

In one dream, he would rush to open Lilly's letter only to find it blank. There was no reply at all, just a plain white sheet of paper.

It was a relief to see her reply, eight days later, in among the rest of the mail that arrived at the ranch.

Whether she had accepted his proposal or turned him down, Daniel was just glad to know at last what she wanted from him, and he tucked it away carefully to read in private.

After breakfast, he snuck up to his bedroom and unfolded it with trembling hands, desperate to know her answer but terrified of what he might find all at once.

Abel and Jill had been nothing but supportive of him throughout his correspondence with Lilly, and when he announced his intention to marry her, they assured him she would accept without question.

As good as it felt to have their unconditional support, however, there was still a part of him that feared he wouldn't like what Lilly had to say in her letter.

Over and over again, he kept returning to the same singular fear. What if there really was something about him that was wholly unlovable?

What if something inside him made him disposable and it was only a matter of time before Lilly realized it, just the way his mother had done?

He was so nervous that the letter slipped from his grasp when he first opened it, and he had to scramble to pick it up from the floor of his bedroom.

With the letter clutched between his hands, Daniel sat down on the edge of his bed and sucked in one slow breath to try and calm his nerves.

*Open it, he told himself slowly. Whether or not she accepts, it's better to know for certain than to be stuck like this, never knowing for sure.*

With that reminder, he let out the breath he had been holding in and tore the envelope open, scanning through the letter to find her response.

She thanked him for the questions he had asked about New York, talked a little about her life as a seamstress, and then finally, at the end of the letter, he saw the word 'proposal.'

*I accept your proposal most graciously.*

He fell back against the bed with a nervous laugh, clutching the letter to his chest.

His heart was pounding against his ribcage so hard and fast that he felt like it might burst at any moment, and he felt giddy from holding his breath for so long, but none of that mattered now.

She had accepted. Lilly wanted to marry him.

Daniel pulled the letter away from his chest to read it again, just to make sure that he was right, that was really what she wanted.

Sure enough, when he looked again, the words were still there, exactly the same as before: *I accept your proposal most graciously.*

All of the anxiety that he had felt bubbling in the pit of his stomach evaporated as he read the words again and again,



allowing them to sink in properly. Lilly wanted to marry him.

Folding the letter carefully once more, Daniel got up from his bed and headed back to the kitchen, where Jill and Abel were still chatting together over the last dregs of their coffees.

They both looked up as he entered the room, and when he met Abel's gaze, Daniel couldn't keep the smile from his face.

"What are you so happy about?" Abel asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Daniel held up the letter. "Lilly wrote back to me about the proposal."

"She did?" Abel looked from Daniel to Jill, and then back again. "Well, what did she say, boy?"

"She accepted! She wants to marry me, and she's agreed to come to Colorado in the next few weeks."

Both Jill and Abel leapt up from the table with cries of delight at the news. Jill threw her arms around Daniel's neck, hugging him tightly, while Abel slapped a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently.

"I'm proud of you, son."

That almost meant more to Daniel than the proposal itself. His chest felt so full, like his heart was swelling, and all he could do was hug Abel again, laughing. "Thank you."

The family—because that was what they were, no matter how abnormal of a family they were—were still embracing each other warmly when they heard another voice from the doorway.

“So, you told them?”

They turned to see Andrew Riggs, the sandy-haired ranch hand Abel had hired a few years earlier, in the doorway. He had pulled the door open and stood there on the porch with his flat cap between his hands, smiling nervously at the group.

Finally, his gaze came to rest on Jill, and his smile widened, just as it always did.

Daniel had long suspected that Andrew was sweet on Jill, but he’d never confronted the other man about it—they weren’t close enough, and he knew Jill would be furious if he was ever to meddle in her affairs.

In turn, Daniel himself had never told Andrew of his relationship with Lilly. The two had talked about marriage before over a few beers in the saloon, but the topic had been a vague notion without a specific bride in mind.

Unless someone else had told him, Andrew should have had no way of knowing about the proposal. *So what is he talking about?* Daniel wondered.

He wasn’t confused for long, though—Jill cleared her throat loudly and stepped away from the family, shaking her head tersely. A look of surprise crossed Andrew’s features, and his cheeks turned pink.

“Who told us what?” Abel asked, narrowing his eyes ever so slightly.

“Oh, nothin’ sir.” Andrew, having turned a nearly impossible shade of red, took a step backwards as he shook his head quickly.

“Nothin’ at all, my mistake.”

Abel was a difficult man to lie to, and he snapped his fingers loudly, pointing at Andrew. “Who told us *what*, boy?”

The commanding tone of Abel’s voice—the same one that controlled herds of cattle and struck deals with men from every walk of life—made Andrew freeze in his tracks.

He still held the flat cap between his hands, but Daniel noticed that he was now twisting it anxiously, like a child might if they were caught doing something they shouldn’t.

“It’s nothing, Abel,” Jill said quickly. “Let’s just focus on Daniel’s engagement, shall we?”

“You’re engaged, too?” Andrew asked, his mouth falling open in surprise.

For a moment, his nerves were forgotten as he stared into the kitchen at Daniel, and then, a second later, the fear returned as he realized what he had said.

“*Andrew!*” Jill hissed. Her cheeks were almost as red as his now—an uncommon sight on the normally unflappable young woman.

“I’m *sorry*,” he began, “I just—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Abel interrupted him with his even, calming voice.

“Alright, alright,” he said, just loudly enough to be heard over Andrew. “Just what’s going on here?”

“Jill, do you want to explain yourself before the poor boy has himself a coronary out on my porch?”

“This can wait,” Jill tried to assure him. “Daniel’s just gotten engaged, we should—”

“Doesn’t sound like I’m the only one, though, does it?” Daniel interjected, looking from Jill to Andrew, and then to Abel. The two men shared a grin.

“Andrew, did you propose to Jill? Without even doing Abel the courtesy of asking first?”

“I don’t need Abel’s permission to marry,” Jill snapped, her embarrassment gone. “I can marry whomever I please.”

“And does it *please you* to marry Andrew?”

“Enough, the pair of you,” Abel said, as sharply as he could manage.

He turned his attention back to Andrew, who was still standing out on the porch, hovering as though paralyzed by some unknown force. “Well?”

“Well, what, sir?” the man asked.

“Well, do you intend on marrying my niece?”

Andrew cleared his throat and nodded slowly, glancing from Abel to Jill for just a moment. “Yes sir, that was my intention.”

“And I’d be correct in saying that it’s your intention on marrying Andrew, wouldn’t I?” Abel returned his attention to Jill, and she

nodded, too.

“Yes.”

“Well, then.” Abel clapped his hands together, grinning at the three of them. “That settles it. This calls for a celebration!”

For the first time in weeks, the evening air was cool enough that it was almost pleasant to walk after dark. The sky above the town was so clear, a smattering of stars and the thin sliver of the moon were visible.

As Daniel looked up at them, he couldn't help but smile gently. It was nice to walk down the main street of town like this, strolling lazily with no real destination in mind and the breeze against his skin.

At the news of Jill's engagement as well as Daniel's, Abel had decided it was time they went out to celebrate in town.

There wasn't enough to celebrate in life, he told them, and what little they *did* have, they ought to cherish, so that night they headed into town with Jill's beau.

They'd celebrated in the saloon, sharing whiskey and wine among the table and toasting to everything they could think of—the engagements, the good weather, the new cattle they would be bringing in soon.

Hours later, they were making their way back through town

toward the ranch. Jill and Andrew walked a few paces ahead with their arms linked, while Daniel and Abel trailed behind.

“My two young wards, all grown up...” Abel let out a heartfelt sigh as he watched Jill walk ahead. “I never imagined there’d be a man brave enough to marry Jill, and I was starting to think you’d never hear back from that young girl in New York.

“And then, on the same day! On the same day, you both tell me you’re to be married!”

Daniel smiled gently as he looked at Abel out of the corner of his eye. The man was drunk.

His cheeks were rosy, his eyes were wide, and his speech was just a little bit slurred as he rambled, but Daniel didn’t mind one bit. He was glad Abel was happy.

“You both grew up to be such fine young people, didn’t you?” Abel carried on, beaming. “*Such* fine young folk.”

“Well, we have you to thank for that,” Daniel reminded him. “I don’t even want to think about where Jill and I might have ended up if not for you.”

Abel nodded slowly at that and opened his mouth to respond. Before he could, though, something in the distance caught his eye. “Oh, what’s that?”

Daniel followed his gaze and peered out into the darkness. There was a shape moving in the shadows, coming toward the group.

It was hard to tell who—or what—the shape was, though, given that they had reached the outskirts of town, where the lights were

few and far between.

Both Daniel and Abel stopped in their tracks, squinting as they tried to make out what was heading in their direction.

Slowly, the figure took shape, and Daniel realized it was a woman. Then, as she got closer, he felt his heart drop to the pit of his stomach.

He knew that slow, confident walk, the walk that reminded him of a coyote stalking prey in the mountains. He knew those tight blonde ringlets, and he knew the voice when it called his name.

Missy.

“Daniel!” she cried, waving to get his attention. “I heard you were in town tonight!”

“What does she think she’s doing out here on the edge of town in the middle of the night?” Abel muttered, shaking his head. “Wandering around like a damn ghost, scaring the life out of people...”

“Fancy running into you all here,” Missy cooed out as she approached.

Jill and Andrew had stopped a few feet away on the path, and both held up their hands in half-hearted greeting as Missy met them.

“Are you heading home already?” she asked.

“Long day ahead of us tomorrow,” Daniel grunted, shuffling on the spot. “What are you doing out here?”



“Oh, I was just admiring the stars.” Missy gestured upward with a giggle. “I was just about to head home when I passed you folks.

“It’s nice to see you all out in town on a weeknight, though; I’ve told Abel time and time again that he keeps you locked away on that ranch far too much.”

She giggled loudly like she’d told a joke and Daniel huffed out something that sounded close to a laugh, glancing up the path at Jill.

Despite how dark it was, he could see her trying—and failing—to conceal a smile.

“You should head home, Missy,” Abel told her. “It’s late, you wouldn’t want your folks to worry about you.”

“Oh Abel,” she cooed. “You worry far too much. I was just on my way back, but since it’s so dark out... Daniel, would you be kind enough to walk me home?”

*Of course, she wants me to walk her back,* Daniel thought to himself miserably, chancing one last glance up the path at Jill, who had now turned her head away.

This wasn’t the first time they had encountered Missy on their way back to the ranch at night, and then, just like now, she had asked Daniel to walk her safely home.

He was starting to suspect that she was lingering on the outskirts of town just in the hopes that he would stumble upon her, as insane as that sounded.

“Go on, Daniel, we’ll carry on ahead.” Abel clapped him on the

shoulder. "Good night, Missy."

"Good night, Abel. Good night, Jill!" she called, waving.

Daniel watched as the group walked off up the dirt path toward the ranch, and as they melted into the darkness, he felt a sense of dread creep in.

He hated to be alone with Missy. There was something about her that set him on edge, and he had to imagine it was close to how deer felt when they knew they were being hunted.

He felt as though she was watching his every move carefully, with an intense, scrutinizing gaze. Once he was in her sights, there was no way of escaping her.

"Oh, what a *gorgeous* night..." she sighed loudly, linking her arm with Daniel's to pull him close. "Don't you think the stars are just *wonderful*, Daniel?"

He had done, until she'd begun talking about them. Now, Daniel almost wished it was a cloudy night. "Yes, they're lovely."

"So, is today a special occasion that I should know about?" Missy asked, changing the topic so abruptly that it caught him off-guard.

"Excuse me?"

"Well, like I said, you folks don't normally venture down this way, do you? Not on a weeknight, at least.

"It just seems like perhaps you were celebrating something, that's all. And I know it's not your birthday yet."

“Oh.” Daniel cleared his throat, feeling a little uncomfortable. Everybody in town knew that Missy had been sweet on him for years, and he wasn’t certain she would take the news of his engagement too well.

To soften the blow a little, he started talking about the cattle acquisition he had successfully pulled off for the ranch.

“Oh, you’re so clever!” Missy simpered. “Of course you managed to make a deal like that! Abel is so lucky to have a man like you by his side, helping him with all of these decisions.

“My, it’s almost like you’re running the place already!”

“Mmh,” Daniel hummed, letting out an uncomfortable laugh. “I suppose so, yes.”

“So, you came into town for that? Who was the man I saw walking with Jill?”

“Andrew. He’s one of the workers at the ranch, and he’s... he’s Jill’s fiancé, as of today,” Daniel admitted.

They were beginning to circle uncomfortably close to the topic of his own proposal, and he could feel his palms begin to sweat at the thought of telling Missy about Lilly.

“Oh, Jill’s found herself a handsome beau, has she? Lucky girl.” Missy let out a long-suffering sigh. “I can’t wait to be married, you know.”

“Is that so?” Daniel asked, swallowing nervously.

“I think I’d like to be proposed to on a night like this,” Missy told

him plainly, as though she was selecting a cut of meat she wanted for supper.

“With the stars up above me like this, and the moon off in the distance... Just me and my gentleman, with no one else to bother us.”

At that, she came to a stop on the path, and Daniel stopped, too, on instinct. Missy took a step in front of him and then turned to face him sharply, but when Daniel tried to pull away, he realized his arm was still tightly linked with hers.

He could only stand there, trapped in her embrace as she looked up at him with that intense gaze that made him so uncomfortable.

“Are you alright?” he asked. He may as well not have bothered speaking, though, because Missy acted as though he had said nothing.

“I think I’d like it to be like this,” she whispered, looking into his eyes. “Just as we’re standing now. Just the two of us, with no one else around.”

Daniel’s heart was racing, but not in the same way as it had done when he’d read Lilly’s letter that morning. Earlier, he had been excited—terrified, too, but definitely excited.

Now, though, there was no excitement, no joy. He just felt the cold, sinking sensation of dread that always came when he spent too long with Missy.

“I’m engaged to be married.”

The words fell out of his mouth before Daniel was even consciously

aware he was thinking them. In fact, he wasn't really aware he'd spoken at all until he saw Missy's shocked expression.

Her mouth fell open, and her eyes went wide for a few seconds, and then she curled her lip in disgust. She ripped her arm from Daniel's with a quick jerking motion.

"Engaged? To *whom*?"

"Her name's Lilly," Daniel explained gently. "We've been writing letters and—"

"*Letters*?" Missy threw her hands up in the air in disbelief, shaking her head. "Letters? Oh Daniel, Daniel, Daniel... You can't just marry a girl you've only ever written to!"

"Johnny did it, and he—"

"Johnny?" Her face crumpled, and for a few moments she seemed genuinely distraught, as if it was physically painful for her to hear Daniel compare himself to Johnny Weston.

"Please tell me he didn't put you up to this," she said.

"No one put me up to this." Daniel felt himself bristling at the suggestion that he was unable to make a decision like this for himself.

Abel had pushed the newspaper into his hands, Jill had reminded him that he deserved to give marriage a chance, but ultimately it was Daniel himself who had written the letters, he who had decided to ask for Lilly's hand in marriage.

No one had forced him to do anything—least of all Johnny Weston,

the man who was best known in town for waking up in the sheriff's cells wearing nothing but his hat and boots.

"But do you even know this girl?" she pressed. "Do you know anything about her?"

"I know plenty," he assured her. "Her name's Lilly. She's from New York City and she—"

"That's not what I mean, Daniel," Missy grabbed both of his hands in her own with a vise-like grip, far too tight to wriggle out of. "I mean, do you *know* this girl?"

"Do you know her hopes, her dreams? What she loves, what she hates? And a girl from New York... Do you really believe she'll fit in here?"

She gestured around the darkness of the town with one hand, still gripping onto Daniel with the other.

"This is a long way from the city, after all. Would you honestly want to subject the girl to this? She'll hate it here!"

"She might not," he reasoned. "She said in her letters that she didn't like the city. She wants to live somewhere quieter, somewhere where she can hear herself think at night.

"I think she might like the quiet out on the ranch. I've given this a lot of thought, Missy, and... Well, I mean, this seems like it might be the right decision."

At that, Missy dropped his hands. Whether it was from shock or horror, Daniel wasn't quite sure, but he suspected it was a mixture of the two.

“You’ve made up your mind, have you?” she asked. “You’re really willing to take this risk on a complete stranger?”

“Yes.” He stuffed his hands deep into the pockets of his trousers quickly, just in case she changed her mind and tried to take hold of them once more.

“I’ve made up my mind. I asked her to marry me, and she said yes. She’ll be coming to Colorado soon.”

She snorted derisively, shaking her head. “Well, I only hope she isn’t of the same breed as your *mother*.”

Daniel winced involuntarily at the mention of his mother. Missy, of all people, knew that his mother was not a wound that ought to be prodded, and yet here she was.

It almost felt like she’d taken a knife and made a fresh cut, opening it up all over again. “Don’t say that.”

“Why not?” Missy asked coldly. “She might well be.

“It takes a wicked woman to break a man’s heart, Daniel—the same kind of wicked as a woman who leaves her own child with a stranger.

“I only hope this risk of yours works out for the best. I’d hate to see it all go so wrong for you again.”

With that, she gathered up her skirts with one hand, turned on her heel, and marched off toward the center of town, leaving Daniel alone on the darkened path.

He watched as Missy disappeared off the main street of town, and

he stood there for a few moments in stunned silence, his head reeling.

The mixture of whiskey, exhaustion, and the speed with which the conversation had soured was making his head spin, and he shook it slowly.

“Time to head home,” he murmured to himself, taking a step backwards. “Time to head home, Daniel...”



**F**or hours, Lilly had watched the scenery fly past the train window with her head all but pressed against the glass. It was incredible to her, as someone who had never left the city she had been raised in, to see such a rich landscape spread out in front of her.

The only scenery she'd ever known was the cramped, dark streets of New York, and the towering buildings that seemed to block out anything else from view.

From time to time she'd looked out toward the ocean, but even then there wasn't much to see besides the endless stretch of dark water.

She'd never known how beautiful the world was outside of the city until she was on her way out to Colorado. The journey took three days, and while she had brought needles and thread to occupy herself during the time, she hardly even touched them.

How could she bring herself to work and risk missing even a little bit of that beautiful scenery fly by?

Fields rolled out toward the horizon, some green and some beige.

As they neared stations, the train would slow just enough for Lilly to make out the figures of farmhands working tirelessly out there, but as they picked up speed again, the men faded into the distance.

As they neared Colorado, Lilly spotted a mountain—something she had never before had the privilege of seeing in the flesh—soaring up toward the clouds.

Unlike the farms and towns that they passed in the blink of an eye, the mountain was so big that it just seemed like an ever-present part of the backdrop.

It was breathtaking to look at, from the steely-gray slopes that dipped into a thick forest, all the way up to the snowy peak that melted into the clouds. Lilly was taken aback by the sight of something so beautiful, but it seemed she was the only passenger so shocked by it.

Her train car was occupied by two elderly women, traveling together to see family for the first time in many years.

In the three days that it took for Lilly to reach Colorado, she became quite well acquainted with her traveling companions, and they too seemed to take quite a shine to her.

Both women had grown up in Colorado, so they paid little mind to the scenery that flew past the window, but Lilly's childlike wonder seemed to amuse them to no end.

"What have you seen now, dear girl?" Mrs. Browning, the elder of the two women, asked.

She was watching Lilly from over the top of her wire-rimmed glasses, with one thin eyebrow raised.

“What have you seen?”

“The mountain out there. It’s *beautiful*.”

“Mmh,” Miss Cartwright hummed in agreement, nodding her head.

“It is.

“It’s even more beautiful in the winter, if you can believe it. It’s one of the few things that *is*, if you ask me.”

“I’ve never seen anything like this in all my life...” Lilly whispered, gazing out of the window as if she was in a trance.

“Well, perhaps that dashing new husband of yours can take you out there on horseback one day, allow you to see the mountains up close,” Miss Cartwright suggested with a small, almost teasing smile.

Lilly felt heat rise to her cheeks at the mention of the man who would soon be her husband.

Both women had been curious as to why a young woman such as herself would have been making such a long journey alone, and they had been overjoyed at the news of her impending marriage.

“Oh, it’s so wonderful to see two young people in love,” Miss Cartwright had cooed, clapping her hands over her chest.

Lilly had answered all of their questions about Daniel as best as she could—she told them about the ranch he worked and lived on, she told them about what little family he had, and she explained the arrangement that had brought them together in the first place.

With little else to do but look out of the window or focus on their

knitting, the two women had been more than happy to listen intently.

And now there were only a few hours left until Lilly was due to meet Daniel.

That morning, she had decided to wear the finest gown she owned, as Daniel had suggested that they would head straight to the small church from the station to be married once she arrived. She wanted to look her best for him, to impress him.

For the fourth or fifth time in only a handful of minutes, Lilly, smoothed down the skirt of her dress nervously, her fingers trembling as they came into contact with the soft fabric.

The dress was a gift from Mrs. Casson, who had kindly offered it to Lilly when she had revealed she had nothing to wear to meet Daniel.

It was not a wedding gown by any means, but it was made of a beautiful pale blue fabric that gathered at her lower back and trailed down like a stream of free-flowing water.

The dress was a few years old and it was a little simple for Lilly's tastes, but that posed little challenge for her.

She had spent a week altering the dress until she felt it would be suitable to wear for herself, bringing it in a little tighter around the bodice to fit snugly against her slim frame.

Once she had added a white trim to the skirts of the dress, and made sure she had an underskirt to give it the delicate fullness she wanted, Lilly felt confident that she looked her best.

When she had changed into the dress that morning and shown it to her two traveling companions, she'd felt even more confident. The two women had applauded her as she made her entrance, and gushed over how pretty she looked until her face was red.

They assured her Daniel would be left speechless when he saw her for the first time, and if he was anything less than completely enraptured, then she ought to simply turn around and head home on the first available train.

As the train slowed, Lilly felt nerves begin to twist her stomach into knots all over again, just as she had felt over and over again in the past few days.

The anxiety that made her feel nauseous had built up and then subsided in a cyclical rhythm, coming in waves that made her lightheaded before leaving her again.

Now, though, it was back in full force, and even as she sat there she could feel her hands trembling in her lap. What if he didn't like her? What if she didn't like *him*?

What if this was all simply a huge mistake? Lilly would be trapped there in Colorado, thousands of miles away from anyone she had ever known, and she would have no way of getting home.

She had used up most of her finances to make the trip, so there would be no way she would be able to afford to return to New York if things didn't go well.

Her traveling companions seemed to sense her worry, because they both leaned in to offer up words of encouragement as the train pulled into the station.

As the wheels beneath them screeched and they jerked to a halt, both women assured her that everything would work out. It was perfectly natural to be nervous in a situation such as this, but she really had nothing to worry about.

Daniel seemed like a lovely man, and she was a charming young woman. They would be a perfect match.

Lilly only hoped the two women were right as she stepped off the train, into the blistering heat of the Colorado summer.

She had lived through long summers in the city and she had assumed that nothing would be worse, but when she stepped onto the platform even the air around her seemed dry.

The sun hit her skin with a fierce blaze that made her recoil for a moment, and it took her a few seconds to adjust to the sudden brightness.

The platform around her was busy with the sound of people stepping off the train, greeting loved ones and collecting luggage, and for a few moments, she was swept up in the clamor and noise, unsure of which way to look.

She wasn't even really certain of what Daniel looked like—she knew he had dark blond hair, she knew he was tall and rather lean, with a tan from his work outside, but that was all.

As she looked up and down the platform, she spotted three men who could have fit that description.

*What if he isn't here?* she wondered, sudden panic taking hold of her.

*What if he changed his mind, and his letter didn't arrive before I left New York? What if he isn't expecting me here at all?*

That nausea was building in the pit of her stomach again, rising up through her body toward her throat. As she stood alone on the platform, her hands began to shake with nerves again as she realized she knew *no one* in Colorado but Daniel.

What was she to do if he didn't arrive on the platform?

Just when panic truly threatened to take her body hostage, Lilly heard someone clear their throat, and a gentle, almost shy voice over her shoulder spoke up above the clamor.

"Excuse me, miss?"

She spun on the spot, startled by the voice so close to her, and turned to face a young man who seemed to match Daniel's description perfectly.

He was tall, towered above her so much that she had to crane her neck to look up at him, and she could see from a quick glance that his hair was blond. He smiled at her, a quick, tight-lipped movement that seemed hesitant, and then he cleared his throat again.

"Lilly?"

"Daniel?" She stared at him in surprise for a few moments, taken aback.

If she was honest, when she had Daniel had begun writing letters to each other, she had resigned herself to the fact that her future husband would not be a particularly handsome man.

He seemed kind in his letters, and intelligent, too, so she had always just assumed there was something about his appearance that had prevented him from being married so far. Perhaps a scar from an accident, or a birth defect that turned women away?

There was no defect that she could see, though, not as she looked up at him with one hand shielding her eyes from the glaring sun.

His hair was a little lighter than she had expected, probably bleached from hours in the sun, and he wore it a little longer than most men in the city.

In all his letters he had never given his eye color, but now she could see they were a warm, rich shade of brown, and they creased a little in the corners when he smiled at her.

“Lilly Summers?” he repeated again, his voice soft.

“Daniel Whitby?” she asked, still taking in his appearance.

“I am, yes.” He looked her up and down slowly and opened his mouth again to speak, but it didn’t seem like he could think of anything more to say besides his name.

Instead, he just stood there dumbly, and swallowed nervously. “These are for you,” he said finally, thrusting his hand towards her in an awkward, jerking motion.

Lilly looked down to see a bunch of flowers clenched in his fist, so tightly that his knuckles seemed fit to burst out of his skin. “Sorry they’re a little...”

He trailed off before pushing the flowers into her hand. She could understand why he wasn’t particularly proud of his gift; the stalks



had been crushed in his fingers, and the flowers themselves were a little wilted.

But despite their slightly sad appearance, Lilly was happy with them. It was the first bunch of flowers anyone had ever thought to give her, and they looked freshly plucked, too.

She appreciated the sentiment.

“Thank you, Daniel.” She smiled up at him. “They’re lovely.”

He breathed out a sigh that sounded like relief and returned her smile, somewhat shakily. “I’m glad you like them. I looked through our letters and realized I’d never asked what kind you liked.”

“I don’t think there are any bad flowers,” she assured him. “It was very sweet of you to pick these for me.”

Daniel ducked his head away for a moment, rubbing the back of his neck as if there was a crick in it, and Lilly heard him clear his throat. She thought she saw his cheeks darken, but he turned his head too quickly for her to be certain.

“Shall I help you with your trunk? I have a wagon ready to take us to the church on the edge of town, if you’re alright with that?”

“I understand if you’re tired,” he added quickly, “and you’d rather wait until—”

“No,” she cut in, shaking her head. As nervous as she was, she was certain she didn’t want to wait for another day to be married.

That would only give her more time to work herself up into anxious knots. No, it would be better to make this arrangement

official, and to call herself Daniel's wife.

"I don't want to wait. If you're happy to, I'd like to be married today."

Daniel seemed relieved at her sudden enthusiasm to be wed, and he nodded quickly. "Of course, let's go collect your things first."

He pulled her trunk from the platform surprisingly easily and lifted it onto the back of a small carriage, pulled by a lone horse with a gorgeous, glossy coat the color of hot cocoa.

"Can I touch it?" Lilly asked quietly as Daniel finished loading her trunk. He smiled, nodding as he joined her by the horse's side.

"Of course." He reached out to lay a hand on the animal's muzzle, rubbing his thumb over its velvety hide. "She's gentle."

Lilly mirrored his movement, resting her hand softly on the creature's flank.

She felt muscles tense up under her touch and the horse let out a quiet snort, but it made no move to get away from her, so Lilly felt comfortable enough to begin stroking in slow motions over the surprisingly silky fine hair. "It's lovely..."

"I think she likes you," Daniel said, scratching the horse behind the ears as if she was a dog.

"You do?"

"Trust me," he chuckled, "she'd let you know if she didn't."

"Does she have a name?"

“Harriet.” Daniel gave the horse one final pat before stepping away. “I don’t know why, I’m not the one who called her that.”

“Did...” Lilly scoured her memory for the names of the people he had spoken about in his letters. “Did Jill name her Harriet?”

His face brightened at that, and as he turned to look at her, he let out a laugh of disbelief. “Yeah, she did. How did you know?”

“It was just a lucky guess,” she admitted.

Daniel shook his head with another low laugh. “Have I really talked about her that much in my letters? Well, she’ll be thrilled to hear it either way.”

A few moments of silence followed that, where neither one of them was quite certain of what to say to the other, until Daniel cleared his throat and spoke again.

He motioned vaguely to the carriage with one hand. “Should we... get moving?”

Lilly’s heart skipped a beat at those words. She knew what they meant, knew the next stop on their journey together would be the church on the outskirts of town, where they would be married.

She nodded quickly, almost afraid that if she paused for too long she would second-guess her own decision.

“Let’s go,” she agreed, extending her arm to allow Daniel to help her up into the carriage. From there, it was only a short ride from the station to the church, both of which were on the outskirts of town.

As Daniel explained on the journey, the ranch he lived and worked on was on the other side of town, so while they would have a ride ahead of them after the ceremony, it would at least give him the chance to show her a little more of the town he had grown up in.

The church wasn't like any of the ones Lilly was familiar with in the city.

This was a much smaller, almost crude building, made out of whitewashed wood with a thatched roof—a world away from the imposing stone buildings that stretched toward the heavens back in New York.

The town preacher was a kind-looking man with leathery skin, browned from years in the hot Colorado sun, and when he saw the two approach on the carriage, he walked out to greet them.

“Daniel! You're here earlier than I expected.”

“Father.” Daniel bowed his head for a moment in a quick show of respect before he jumped out of the carriage and rushed to help Lilly down.

The preacher then turned his warm smile on her. “And you must be Miss... Summers, is that correct? My, you're a pretty young thing, and Daniel told me you came all the way from New York?”

“Yes sir, that's right.”

Although she was still a little anxious about all of this, between Daniel's kindness and the calm, inviting demeanor of the elderly man in front of her, Lilly felt her nerves begin to subside just a little.

If everyone in town were as nice as the two of them, she would enjoy her life here very much.

“Why don’t you both come inside, and get out of this hot sun?” The old man beckoned them toward the rickety wooden doors of the church.

Lilly and Daniel followed him, walking side by side as they made their way in.

Thankfully, the inside of the church gave them a little reprieve from the hot sun, and Lilly let out a quiet sigh of relief.

The priest walked ahead of them to the front of the church, muttering to himself under his breath. It sounded to Lilly as though he was making a list of tasks that needed to be completed.

With his back to them, Lilly took a moment to fan herself with the hand that wasn’t clutching her bouquet of flowers.

She had always wondered what it might be like to be wed in front of family and friends, to be a part of a big, happy celebration, marrying a man that she loved.

This was far from that reality; she was standing alone in a town she had never been to, marrying a man she had only ever written to. She’d never even met the priest before.

And yet, even though this wasn’t the marriage of her dreams or the wedding she had fantasized about, Lilly still felt excited as she approached the front of the church.

This was the first step of her new life, and from here on out, she was going to be Mrs. Daniel Whitby. How could she not be excited

by that prospect, even if it wasn't happening in quite the way she had hoped?

The ceremony was short, and Lilly hardly heard a word the priest in front of her said. She was too busy sneaking glances at her new husband-to-be, still surprised by his appearance.

He was much taller than she was, with strong, broad shoulders (likely from life on the ranch). His profile was just as handsome as the full view of his face, with high, angular cheekbones and a sharp jaw.

*Are there no women in this town?* she wondered. *Are they blind?*

As the ceremony ended, Lilly realized neither she nor Daniel had any rings to exchange; it was the sad truth of marrying a man she had never met before.

When he led her out of the church and thanked the priest for performing such a quick ceremony, Daniel seemed apologetic.

"I didn't want to have a ring for you that wouldn't fit," he explained as they made their way out into the glaring sun once more.

"But now that you're here, we can have one made for you," he told her. "There's a place in town that'll be able to have one made."

Lilly smiled gently as he helped her up onto the carriage, then waited for him to join her.

"I'm not upset. I've always thought... A ring is just a symbol of a marriage. It's not the most important part of the union."

“I suppose it’s not,” Daniel glanced at her quickly. “So, what do you think the most important part *is*?”

“Well, we are.”

Daniel’s eyes creased at the corners as he heard that, and he let out a gentle chuckle. It was low, rumbling from somewhere in the middle of his chest, and Lilly liked the sound of it.

“I have to admit, I’ve never really stopped to think about it, but... you’re right. Are you ready to head home?”

“Absolutely.” Lilly nodded determinedly. She couldn’t be certain of what her life would look like from this moment onwards, but she was excited to see it. “Let’s go.”

It was strange to ride through the town as a married woman. Lilly had always wondered how it would feel to be wed to a man, and whether she would feel somehow *different*, but as she sat beside Daniel, she realized she didn’t feel any different at all.

Perhaps she was a little less nervous than she had been when she’d first arrived in Colorado, but that was all. No, besides that, she felt exactly the same as she had done that morning.

Every so often as they rode from the church to the ranch, Lilly would glance at Daniel out of the corner of her eye, almost as if she was afraid he would disappear from sight if she looked away too long.

It seemed too good to be true that she had found a man so kind and generous, and so handsome, too. Was it really possible that

this man was her husband?

Or was there something lurking beneath the surface that she didn't yet know, something that would explain just why he was still a bachelor?

"The town isn't very big," Daniel explained as they rode through the main street, "especially not after living in New York for your whole life.

"But we *do* have everything I expect you'd want, don't worry. We've got a post office, and the mail train comes in before sunrise every morning, so you'll likely have letters before breakfast.

"We've got the sheriff's office—don't worry, he's a friendly enough fella. Then there's the boarding house just up ahead of us, which, uh..."

Daniel trailed off for a moment, and rubbed the back of his neck in a move that wasn't unlike the way she fiddled with a stray lock of hair when she was nervous.

"Well, I wouldn't go in there if I were you. *I* never go in, myself, I just know that some... some of the ranch hands have been known to—"

Lilly interrupted him with a small smile. She could see just how uncomfortable he was, and didn't want to let him ramble on and embarrass himself.

"I think I understand what'll be found in there. There are... houses like those in New York, as well."

To change the subject, she pointed out a larger building that they



passed by. “What’s that?”

“Town hall,” Daniel answered quickly, seeming grateful to move on. “If there are any big discussions to be had about the future of the town, that’s where we’ll be havin’ them.”

As they continued on through town, Daniel kept pointing out places that she might find interesting, and for the most part Lilly paid attention.

He seemed to know a lot about the town, and if she ever had a question for him he would answer it without hesitation, which she appreciated.

Every so often, though, something in town would catch her attention, and her mind would wander from Daniel’s tour. Mostly it was passersby, or the horses tied by the stable, or the children that ran past them.

There was one figure by the side of the road that stole Lilly’s attention for a different reason. With everything else she saw, she was struck by a sense of curiosity, a sense of surprise at seeing something so new and different.

But as they passed by the stables, a woman on the side of the street caught Lilly’s eye because of the way she was watching them.

Unlike the rest of the people in the streets, who glanced at them and then looked away just as quickly, this woman stared straight at the newlyweds with a fierce, piercing gaze that seemed to bore straight into Lilly.

She stared at her so intensely, so passionately, that it was difficult for Lilly to hold her gaze for long, and she found herself forced to

look away.

It wasn't until they passed by the woman that Lilly chanced a look back at her, glancing over her shoulder to see if the woman was still staring at the carriage.

Sure enough, even though they had moved on past, the woman was tracking them with her eyes, her head craned at an uncomfortable angle to watch as they made their way through the town.

There was something so deeply unsettling about the young woman, but Lilly wasn't quite sure what it was that she found so troubling. Perhaps it was just the intensity of her stare, although that may have just been a custom of people out west that she wasn't yet used to.

Folks in New York barely even glanced at each other—they were all far too busy to make eye contact and were perfectly happy to scurry past other strangers in the street.

Having grown up in that environment, Lilly had been content in her life of anonymity, safe in the knowledge that she was little more than a face in a sea of other faces.

She had to remind herself that she wasn't in New York any longer; everyone here knew each other. Perhaps the woman was just surprised by the newcomer, trying to figure out who she was.

Even as she told herself that, though, Lilly couldn't help but feel her skin prickle a little as she thought about that cold, unblinking stare.

Daniel had been so nervous when he'd waited at the station that his palms had become slick with sweat, and he'd nearly dropped the pathetic bunch of flowers he'd plucked.

He hadn't even thought about a gift for Lilly on her arrival—not until he'd reached the station and found a man younger than him eagerly clutching some purple blossoms to his chest.

Thankfully, the town was rife with wildflowers, so it hadn't taken him long to source a handful that looked decent enough.

He'd pulled them out as carefully as possible just as the whistle of the train sounded in the distance, and by the time it had come to a stop in the station, he'd made his way back to the platform, trying (and failing) to calm his nerves.

Even now that they were married and heading back to the ranch, Daniel didn't feel any less nervous. Every time he caught a glimpse of his new bride out of the corner of his eye, his heart raced and his hands would tremble against the reins.

When he'd watched her step onto the platform, Daniel had been struck by her beauty.

Her name was apt—she was just as beautiful as a flower, with long golden tresses that were pinned back from her neck, creamy skin, and thick lashes that framed the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen.

They were green, but that didn't seem like nearly a good enough description for them. He'd seen folks with green eyes before, but Lilly's eyes were something in a world of their own.

They were impossibly beautiful, the color of fields in late spring when the grass was at its richest and most luscious. If Daniel was honest, he could have spent hours getting lost in those eyes.

She was everything he had hoped her to be when he'd read her words over and over again, memorizing the curves of her letters late into the night; she was beautiful, charming, kind.

And it seemed the rest of the family felt the same way about her.

After the ceremony and the short ride through the town, the newlyweds returned to the ranch where Abel, Jill, and Andrew were waiting for them.

When Daniel had left the ranch to collect Lilly, they had sent him off with a little gentle, good-natured teasing and the promise that there would be food waiting for them on their return.

It was no empty promise, which Daniel realized as they approached the main house side by side—the smell of food wafted through the closed door before they'd even made it to the porch steps, drawing them in closer.

As they neared the house, Daniel heard a familiar excited voice from within—Jill's. "They're here already, they're here!"

Before they'd even reached the foot of the stairs that led to the porch, a small group of people rushed out to greet them. Jill came through the door first, closely followed by Andrew, with Abel bringing up the rear.

"Oh my goodness, let me get a good look at her!" Jill bounded down the steps to meet them, taking both of Lilly's hands in her own.

"Oh you're *stunning*, aren't you? Daniel, she's beautiful!"

"Lilly, this is—" Daniel began, but he was interrupted almost immediately.

"Jill, I'm Jill. Oh, it's so lovely to finally meet you! Daniel hasn't told us all that much about you yet, but it's going to be so nice to have another woman on the ranch with me!"

Many people were put off by Jill's overly friendly nature, but to Lilly's credit, she seemed to take it in her stride. Perhaps that was just how folks tended to be in New York, and it felt a little more like home for her.

She didn't pull away from Jill nervously, or shy away from the overload of excitement, but beamed at her instead.

"Daniel told me about you in his letters, it's so lovely to meet you, too. And it's nice to know I'll have a friend here."

"Of course you will," Jill assured her. "Oh, and this is Andrew, my beau."

"We actually were engaged on the same day Daniel received his reply from you, so I suppose *technically* we were engaged on the

same day.”

She beckoned Andrew over as she spoke, linking her arms with his. Andrew inclined his head once, smiling politely at Lilly. “It’s nice to meet you, miss.”

“And the man of the house.” Daniel pointed up onto the porch, where Abel stood alone, smiling down at the rest of the group like a proud father. “Abel.”

“Why don’t you come up here where the light is better, Lilly?” he suggested kindly. “I’m an old man, my eyesight ain’t nearly as good as Jill’s is.”

Lilly took the steps slowly, lifting her skirt up around her ankles so as not to trip. Daniel followed close behind her, and together, they joined Abel on the porch.

His face creased into a warm smile as he looked at Lilly, and then he let out a low chuckle. “Well, Jill is right, as always. You’re beautiful.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“A fine young woman for our Daniel here.” Abel gestured to Daniel before pulling open the front door to the house. “Why don’t you come on in, I’ll show you the place.

“Of course, you won’t be living in here, this is the main house of the ranch. You’ll be living in the cabin just down the path, the place Daniel built with his own two hands.”

“I had help.” Daniel cleared his throat, glancing over his shoulder at Andrew, who grinned. If he was being honest, he’d had a fair

amount of help from his friend.

“That doesn’t diminish the accomplishment,” Abel called as he led them through into the kitchen.

The table had already been set with a place for each of them, and from the looks of the spread, it seemed like they’d put together a feast.

“Now, we know there’s some foods folks out on the east coast might consider a little strange.” Abel smiled kindly at Lilly as he took his place at the head of the table. “And if that’s the case, you tell us.

“We won’t take offence, I promise you. But to introduce you to our home, we decided to give you a little taste of our favourite meals out on this side of the country.”

“I’ve never seen a lot of these before,” Lilly admitted. Daniel pulled out a chair for her before sliding into the one right beside her. “But it all smells lovely.”

“Plus, there’s dessert,” Jill assured her. “Cobbler.”

“You’ve got a little of everything,” Abel explained. “Cornbread, soda biscuits, corned beef, and even a trout that Andrew caught us this morning.”

The food was served quickly, and for a little while the table was quiet. Everyone was happy to eat in silence for a little while, but it didn’t take long for the questions to begin.

Everyone wanted to know more about Lilly’s life in New York—none of them had ever been to the East Coast, and they were all

fascinated by the idea of it.

It seemed impossible for the world to be so different there, and yet when Lilly described it to them, that was how it sounded.

“It sounds so exciting there,” Jill breathed out, as Lilly described the constant bustle and noise of the streets.

“It sounds loud,” Abel chuckled. “A little too fast for my tastes.”

“And mine,” Lilly agreed. “I take it things are a little more relaxed here?”

“We like to take life one day at a time, as it comes. I suppose it’s a little harder to do that in a big city like New York, though, even if you wanted to.”

Daniel had to admit, he couldn’t quite imagine Abel living out in the city, abandoning the quiet life he’d formed out here in the country.

Would Lilly have a similar problem, moving from the busy life of the city to the quiet of the rural west? Would she come to miss the noise and the excitement?

He hoped she wouldn’t, but only time would be able to tell.

As they finished the last of the dinner and made their way onto the dessert that Jill had prepared, the questions kept coming from both sides.

Lilly was interested in learning more about the new life she would be leading with the family, and they were just as interested to see where she had come from.



Daniel sat back in his chair as the conversation flowed, watching as Lilly settled into her place at the table.

She made them laugh with her stories, captivated them as she told them about her life, and for how natural it all seemed, Lilly may as well have been a part of their family for years.

But then, just when things seemed to be going so smoothly, there was a knock at the front door, taking them all by surprise. Abel hadn't told them to expect anyone else, and judging by how confused he looked, it didn't seem he'd invited anyone else to their dinner.

"I'll get it," Daniel offered, pushing his chair out.

It seemed everyone else was engrossed in Lilly's tales of New York, and although he wanted to stay next to his new wife, he already knew many of these stories from her letters.

They weren't expecting guests, but Abel often had visitors after dark. It wasn't uncommon for other ranchers to stop by under the cover of darkness, asking for a little advice when no one was looking.

It saved them the embarrassment of folks knowing they were struggling, and Daniel couldn't really fault anyone for wanting to avoid that.

But when he pulled the door open and peered out onto the porch, Daniel was surprised to see the visitor was no rancher.

In fact, it wasn't a man at all. It was the last person he wanted to see at that moment.

*Missy.*

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his tone a little sharper than he had intended.

The coldness of his voice obviously seemed to take her by surprise, because her delicate brows shot upward before she regained her composure and smiled at him.

“Why else would I be here, you silly man?” She giggled. “I’m here to celebrate your marriage!”

“My—” Daniel paused and glanced back into the kitchen, where the rest of his family were still celebrating.

None of them seemed to have registered who was at the door, and it didn’t seem like any of them were expecting a guest.

“How did you know about the marriage? How did you—”

“I was invited, of course!” She beamed up at him with that same smile that always made him so uneasy, and for the first time, Daniel realized just *why* he hated it so.

No matter how wide her lips stretched, or how many of those pearly white teeth she showed, Missy’s smile *never* seemed to reach her eyes.

They never lit up like Jill’s, or creased in the corners as Abel’s did, or softened the way he’d now seen Lilly’s do. They remained just as cold as ever.

He didn’t want to invite her in, to join in with this celebration. Today was supposed to be a day that he spent surrounded by his

family.

He was supposed to be happy, bathing in the love and support of the people closest to him. And he *certainly* didn't want Missy to be a part of that—more to the point, he knew no one else would want her there, either.

No one would have invited her, no matter what she said.

He could have turned her away and closed the door sharply in her face, but Abel had raised him better than that. When Daniel was a boy, Abel had always been careful to make sure he was polite and understanding, no matter the attitude of the other person.

Even with someone like Missy, he struggled to treat her coldly, or even with indifference.

So, despite how much he wanted to tell her to leave, Daniel opened the door a little wider for her, and stepped back to allow her in.

He forced a smile on his face, although he wasn't sure it was convincing. "Why don't you come in?"

"Thank you!" She brushed past him and opened her arms out wide. "My, don't you all look like a wonderful, happy family?"

At the sound of her voice, the rest of the table finally turned toward the door. When Daniel saw their expressions, he knew his suspicions were right—they looked just as surprised as him to see Missy in the kitchen.

No one had asked her to be there. No one *wanted* her there. And yet, despite that, there she was.

*What on earth is she up to?* Daniel wondered, watching as Missy circled the table with slow, deliberate footsteps.

There were only enough seats for the guests who *had* been invited, and as Daniel had gotten up to let her in, his was the only available space, right beside Lilly. He wasn't the only one to notice this, apparently, because Abel pushed his chair out, clearing his throat.

"Missy, why don't you have my chair?" he offered, dropping his napkin on the table. "I can go fix you up a plate, and I'll bring another chair in from my office."

"No no, Abel," she simpered, tapping the back of his chair with the tips of her fingers. "You keep your seat. "*Daniel* can fix me up a plate, he knows what I like. Don't you?"

Until that moment, her eyes had been locked intently onto Lilly's, but as she spoke, she looked up at Daniel and smiled thinly.

"And if you wouldn't mind fixing me a drink as well, I would appreciate it. After all, it's *awfully* hot out there tonight."

With that, she turned her gaze back to Lilly and slid into Daniel's unoccupied seat. The room was so quiet they could all hear the legs of the chair scrape against the wooden flooring as she tucked herself in closer to the table.

It felt like they were all holding their breath in unison, waiting for what might come out of her mouth. Would she at least pretend not to be angry about the wedding, for the sake of social decency?

She hadn't managed to keep her feelings hidden until this point, so Daniel didn't really expect much of her.

Despite his apprehension, that same politeness that had forced him to open the door and invite Missy inside in the first place made sure that he wouldn't cause a fuss.

It carried him into the kitchen, where he made up a plate of food for their unexpected guest, and it poured her a glass of wine, too.

Then, rather than bringing in another chair for Missy to use, Daniel brought in another one for himself and sat on the other side of Lilly, wincing at the growing anxiety and unease that swelled in the pit of his stomach.

It hadn't *always* been like this. There had been a time—so long ago now that he could hardly remember it—that Missy's feelings for him had been little more than a schoolgirl crush, and while he had found her annoying, Daniel had largely ignored her.

He had once complained to Abel that he didn't like how Missy always tried to spend time with him when he didn't want to, and Abel had simply laughed, assuring him that she would grow out of it at some point.

But she never had. In fact, her infatuation with Daniel had only gotten worse as they had grown up.

Where she had once laughed a little too loudly at his jokes, or complimented him too often for him to feel comfortable, over time Daniel had gone to great lengths to avoid her.

Her intensity and constant demand for his attention had started to feel oppressive when they became teenagers, and then she had started to drop not-so-subtle hints about the possibility of their future marriage.

One night, when he must have been only twenty, Daniel had finally reached his breaking point, exhausted by the constant badgering from Missy.

He remembered telling her politely—but firmly—that he was not about to propose to her, and had no intention of marrying her.

Her face had scrunched up into an uncomfortable grimace, and then a noise had escaped her trembling lips that seemed close to a howl, before she'd broken down into anguished sobs.

It had been the first time Daniel had ever seen a woman cry like that, and he hadn't known what to do to make it stop.

As it turned out, the only thing that would quell her whimpering was the promise that they would still remain friends. She'd asked him that weakly, her voice muffled with tears, and Daniel had been so desperate to calm her down that he had agreed without hesitation.

In an instant, her mood had brightened, and she'd gone back to smiling at him as always. From that night on, her pestering had continued, and Daniel was always too nervous of repeating that conversation to pull away from her.

Perhaps he should have been firmer, though.

Maybe, if he'd put his foot down with Missy all those years earlier, she wouldn't have pushed her way into the kitchen and sat beside his new wife, smiling at her with those cold, calculating eyes.

When the last guest arrived at the table, it took Lilly a few moments to register who she was.

Although she'd heard the woman assure Daniel that she had been invited to the party, it didn't seem like anyone wanted her there, and Lilly felt the others around the table stiffen at this new woman's presence.

As the woman approached the table and began to walk around it to take Daniel's seat, Lilly recognized her. She'd seen this woman before, only a few hours earlier in town.

She was the woman who'd scowled at her with that intense, fiery gaze when they had passed through, the one who had taken such an instant dislike to Lilly.

The scowl was gone now, though, replaced by a thin-lipped smile as she slid into the seat Daniel had occupied only a few moments earlier.

She pulled her chair in close, until she could lean her elbows on the tabletop and rest her chin against her palms, propping herself up.

“So, you must be Daniel’s lovely new wife, mustn’t you?”

“Yes, I am.” Out of the corner of her eye, Lilly saw Daniel duck out of the room to find a chair for himself.

She hoped he wasn’t gone long—there was something about this woman she didn’t like. Perhaps she was judging her too harshly without knowing her, but after seeing that furious scowl on her face earlier, Lilly couldn’t help feeling like her smile was a little disingenuous.

“I have to apologize, though, it seems you have me at an advantage. I don’t know your name, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, I’m Missy,” the woman said, as though Lilly should have known her by name alone. “Missy Miller.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Miller.” Lilly smiled politely as Daniel returned to the room with a new chair in hand.

To her left, Jill made space for him, and he pulled his chair in a little closer, so that his legs were almost flush with her own. It was strange—she hardly knew him, but somehow she felt just a little better knowing he was by her side.

“Daniel told me about you,” Missy said, taking a sip from her wine glass.. “A girl who came all the way from New York, is that right?”

“Yes, that’s correct.” Lilly glanced from Missy to the other faces around the table in turn, finally landing on Daniel for a moment.

Everyone *except* for Missy seemed uncomfortable, unable to meet her gaze. There was something decidedly *off* about this whole thing, but she wasn’t quite sure what it was yet.



From the way Missy was speaking so casually with everyone, lounging in the kitchen chair as though she'd done it a hundred times before, it seemed like she was close to the family, but the strained expressions Lilly saw told a different story. Who was this woman?

"Such a long way for a young girl to come, all on her own," Missy breathed out, shaking her head slowly.

"Although, I do suppose that for the right person, one would cross an ocean. Isn't that right, Daniel?"

To her left, Lilly heard Daniel clear his throat and answer quietly, "Yes, I suppose so."

"Well, if you're now a part of this family, I suppose I'd best get to know a little about you, shouldn't I?" Missy reasoned, flashing a bright smile that disappeared just as quickly as it had graced her features. "Tell me a little about yourself."

It wasn't the first time Lilly had heard those words that day. In fact, it wasn't the first time she'd heard them since she had sat down at the table, but there was something about the tone of Missy's voice that she didn't like.

When Abel had inquired about her family, or Jill had wanted to know about her work, they had gently asked her questions. When Missy pushed herself into Lilly's personal space, though, it wasn't a request.

It was an order. Missy wasn't *asking* anything of her, she was demanding information. And what could Lilly do but oblige? After all, *she* was the stranger here, not Missy.

“Well, I’m twenty years old. I was born and raised in the city, and until a few days ago, I’d never left it before in my life.”

“Oh, so this must all be a charming little adventure for you,” Missy said, cocking an eyebrow. “How quaint.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

“And what of your parents?” The next question came before Lilly had even had the chance to draw breath.

“Do they approve of you traveling all this way to meet a stranger? They must miss you, mustn’t they?”

“Missy,” Daniel said quietly. “That’s enough.”

Lilly winced involuntarily. While she had never gone into specific details about the deaths of her parents in her correspondence with Daniel, he had asked in his first letter about them, and she had told the truth.

He knew they were gone, and she was grateful for him to come to her defence.

But his defensiveness only seemed to spark Missy’s interest further. “Oh, my dear... is that a rather sensitive topic for you? Oh, you poor lamb.”

She reached over and patted Lilly’s hand in a gesture that was probably supposed to be comforting, and perhaps from any other person it would have been.

Her fingertips barely grazed the skin of Lilly’s hand, though—it was purely performative, something that might have *looked*

sympathetic from a distance. In reality, it was just as cold and fake as her smile.

Missy's questions continued to come, one after the other with a frightening speed. She asked about what life was like back in New York, what Lilly had done to provide for herself, how long she and Daniel had been writing to each other.

They were all the same questions that Lilly had already answered from the others around the table, but under Missy's intense gaze, the whole thing felt more like an inquisition, like she was a criminal under investigation for something.

Finally, Lilly saw an opportunity to leave the table. Everyone had finished their plates, even Missy, and in a bid to prove herself useful and have a few moments of peace, she leaped up to clear the table of dishes.

Jill quickly followed suit, and together they managed to gather up every plate and bring them through to the small room that had been sectioned off to wash dishes.

As they walked into the room, Lilly heard footsteps behind her and glanced over her shoulder to see Missy had followed them, a stack of plates in her own hands.

"Don't you worry yourself, Jill," she said brightly, setting the plates down. "I think your darling beau in there wants you for something, so I'm happy to help our new friend here with these dishes."

Jill looked a little uncertain at the idea of leaving the two women alone. She wavered for a moment, glancing between Lilly and Missy in conflict, but then when someone in the other room called her name, she had no choice but to leave them.

Both Lilly and Missy watched her leave, neither one speaking up as they listened to her footsteps fade into the noise of general chatter from the other room.

Once she was out of earshot, Missy turned sharply to look at Lilly again. The smile that had been frozen on her face was gone now, replaced by a scowl not unlike the one Lilly had seen earlier in the town.

Her lip was curled in disgust, as though she was looking at a common beggar on the street, and the same anger Lilly had spotted before was back.

“I hope you know what you’re doing with Daniel,” she said after a few moments of silence. Despite how angry she seemed to be, she didn’t raise her voice even a little as she approached Lilly, although Lilly almost would have preferred that.

Her voice was soft instead, laced with the kind of cold, calculating anger that was so much more terrifying than pure rage, and Lilly felt herself take a step back involuntarily.

“Excuse me?”

“Daniel’s a sensitive soul, so I hope you know how to handle him,” Missy repeated, taking another step toward Lilly until the two were mere inches apart.

“And you’d better not hurt him. After all, it’s not as though you’re the first woman in his life. He *has* other options if you don’t treat him the way he *deserves* to be treated.”

Lilly had never before been threatened by another person. She’d been in arguments with clients over the past few years, largely due

to discrepancies over pay or comments on her work that were unjustified, but that all felt so wildly different to this.

This felt like Missy was making it her mission to personally protect Daniel from any harm that Lilly might do to him, and there would be consequences if Lilly were to step out of line. She sounded... almost dangerous.

“I have no intention of hurting Daniel,” she assured the other woman, hoping her voice didn’t betray her nerves. “I wouldn’t have come all this way from New York if that was what I wanted.”

Missy narrowed her eyes, just for a moment, and then nodded slowly. “Good, let’s see to it that this stays that way, shall we?”

With that, she turned on her heel and marched back into the dining room with the rest of the guests, leaving Lilly alone with a pile of filthy dishes.

As she stood there on her own, listening to the others chat away and laugh together, she recoiled, shaking her head slowly. This wasn’t her home, these people weren’t her family.

She was an interloper here, hanging on the sidelines without really taking part. Meanwhile, Missy was in there with her new husband, laughing and joking with everyone else.

*Who is she?* Lilly wondered, frowning at the spot Missy had stood in only a few moments earlier. *Who is she to Daniel? Why does she seem to know him so well?*

*Why did everyone become so uncomfortable when she entered the room, and what on earth did she mean by that warning? I’m not the only woman in his life?*

A cold sense of dread came over her as she thought about it. As much as she didn't want this to be the case, there was only one conclusion that she could come to when she looked at the situation before her.

Had Daniel been involved with Missy before Lilly had arrived in town?

In his letters, Daniel had briefly mentioned the small house he had begun building two years earlier, and Lilly had been thrilled by it.

By his own account, it wasn't much, and he'd warned her that it was nothing to get excited about. She'd tried to curb her excitement.

The single-story house stood on the edge of the residential parcel of land on the ranch, the front door facing the main house and the bedroom windows overlooking the ranch itself.

That night, when the plates were cleared and the group decided it was time to retire to bed, Daniel led Lilly out of the main house and down the narrow dirt path that led to his house. No—to *their* house.

"Is that it?" she asked, pointing to the black shadow that loomed in the darkness. It certainly looked like a building, but it was difficult to tell without any light.

"That's the house, yes." Daniel rubbed the back of his neck and laughed nervously. "I really shouldn't have even mentioned it to

you in the letters, it's hardly anything special.

"Just a few rooms, a roof... I mean, I hardly ever sleep in it, to be honest; most nights I just sleep in the main house. Abel still has my bedroom there all made up."

"Don't talk so poorly of it." She smiled. "It's a house you built with your own two hands. You should be proud of that."

"Besides... it's been a long time since I've had a proper home. I'll welcome it no matter what."

"Well..." Daniel let out a low sigh as he led her up the steps to the porch. They stumbled through the front door side by side in the darkness, and then Lilly heard Daniel fumble for an oil lamp.

After a few moments of fiddling, the sharp sound and acrid smell of a match being struck, and then a low curse when Daniel singed his fingertips, they had a pale glow to guide them through the house.

Even with the light on, there wasn't much to look at.

The front door opened to a hallway, with the kitchen on their left and what appeared to be a den to their right. There were more doors further down the hallway, but it was too dim to see anything.

When she craned her neck to look into the kitchen and the den, Lilly couldn't help but feel a little disappointed in the decor—more specifically, the *lack* of decor. There was a single table and two chairs in the kitchen, two big armchairs in the den, and that was it.

There was no rug on the wooden floor by the hearth in the den, no



tablecloth in the kitchen. There weren't even curtains.

"I wouldn't exactly go rushin' to call this a *home* as such," Daniel admitted with a sigh. "I'm not one for interior decoration, I must admit.

"I-I didn't struggle at all to put the beams and tiles and floorboards into place, but when it comes to all the other details, I just... I don't have an eye for them, I suppose.

"I wanted the place to feel nice and warm, like Abel's does, but I don't even know where to start."

He must have been nervous, because he was rambling the way he had done earlier, when introducing her to his family. She suspected he probably wanted to make a good impression, but there wasn't much to make an impression *with*.

"Well, I suppose it's a good thing that I happen to have a *very* good eye for decoration," she assured him. In the dim lighting, she saw his expression brighten, and his eyes widened with excitement.

"You do?"

"It's a lovely house," she assured him. "It just needs a little... personal touch, that's all. Some curtains, some details that make you feel like you're truly *welcome* here.

"I've never had the chance to build a home up like this before, it's exciting."

Daniel breathed out a low sigh, and his shoulders slumped a little at that. He seemed to relax before her eyes, all but melting in front of her, and another smile appeared on his lips.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that, I have to say.”

“I just...” Lilly paused, looking up and down the hallway. “This house *does* have a bed, doesn’t it? We won’t have to sleep on the floor or anything, will we?”

“No, we won’t,” he promised, holding out his arm for her. “Come on, I’ll show you the primary bedroom.”

The main bedroom, much like the rest of the house, had little worth discussing. There was, of course, a bed, and a bureau pushed up against the back wall, but that was it.

The room was spacious, far bigger than what she’d had back in New York, and perhaps that only made it look even more empty. Nonetheless, Lilly was grateful that she had *somewhere* to rest her head, though after the events of the day she would have slept almost anywhere.

Daniel gave her the privacy to change out of her dress and into a far more comfortable nightgown, which she was grateful for.

Although they were now husband and wife and there would be certain expectations of them both, the thought of him seeing her in any state of undress was mortifying.

For good measure, before he came back into the bedroom, she hopped into bed and pulled the sheets all the way up to her chin, nervously peeking out at him over the top.

When he returned to the bedroom, it seemed he had also managed to find some clothes to wear for the night.

He’d changed out of his suit into much looser, more comfortable-

looking clothes, but he still looked a little stiff and uneasy when he perched on the edge of the bed.

“I still can’t really believe I’m a married man,” he admitted with a soft chuckle, looking up at her. “I can’t believe you came all this way...

“You’re really here, with me. This is all real isn’t it?”

“It’s all real,” she assured him. “We’re married.”

Daniel let out another low sound of disbelief at that, and then rolled into bed beside her. The sudden shift of the mattress beneath his weight came as a surprise to her, and she felt herself tense up as the bed dipped a little toward his side.

It was strange, sharing a bed with someone. She hadn’t done it since she was a little girl, and her mother had beckoned her under the sheets late at night after a bad dream had woken her. Since then, she’d always slept alone, and she’d grown used to it.

Her new husband didn’t seem any more familiar with the situation, as he struggled to settle comfortably on the bed. For a few moments he shifted around, trying to get comfortable without brushing his limbs up against hers.

When his foot touched her calf briefly, they both froze up immediately, like wild animals that had been caught by a hunter. Slowly, they turned their heads to look at each other, and seeing their shared surprise, they both started to laugh.

“I’m sorry,” Daniel said finally, shaking his head. “I’m not used to sharing a bed with anyone, let alone a wife.”

“I was just thinking the same thing,” she confessed, relaxing a little. It was comforting to know she wasn’t the only one who felt nervous.

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable,” he said slowly. “I know it must be difficult, having had so much change in such a short space of time.

“A few days ago you were living alone on the other side of the country, you had a different job... and now everything’s so, so different.

“I couldn’t even begin to imagine, and I don’t want you to feel as though I’m pushing too much on you at once. I would never want that.”

His concern was touching, and Lilly felt herself relax even more. “Thank you, Daniel, I appreciate that a lot.”

“Could I,” he paused for a moment, “could I kiss you?”

Lilly was taken aback by the request and wasn’t sure what to say at first. No one had ever asked her that before, but now that she was a married woman, she reminded herself, it shouldn’t have been surprising to her.

A little nervously, she nodded. “Yes.”

Daniel leaned in until his face was only inches from Lilly’s, close enough that his nose could nudge gently against the tip of hers, and then he pressed a kiss to her lips.

It was a soft, barely-there pressure, and it only lasted for a moment before he pulled back sharply, smiling at her.

“Well...” he began, a little lost for words. “Goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight, Daniel.”

The two settled back under the covers, and Daniel extinguished the oil lamp. They were plunged into darkness, and even though she was completely exhausted by everything that had happened over the course of the day, Lilly struggled to even close her eyes.

Instead she just lay there silently, her hands folded neatly over her chest as she started into the endless void, listening to the gentle sound of Daniel breathing beside her.

He seemed nice. He had seemed nice in his letters, too, and there had been a part of her that was worried it was all just a façade that he’d put on for her benefit.

On the long journey, she’d had plenty of time to worry that the man she would be marrying wouldn’t be the same man she had spent all this time writing to—but, thankfully, he seemed as though he was just as sweet and caring as she’d hoped.

The reassurance that she was laying beside a good man should have helped her drift off to sleep, but as she lay there, sleep would not come.

A nagging thought at the back of her mind still bothered her, and every time she closed her eyes, a voice would speak up.

*Who is Missy?*

The same nerves that she had felt on the train returned with full force as she laid there, twisting her hands together anxiously.

Daniel had never mentioned Missy in any of his letters. He'd spoken about Jill at length, the girl who was like a sister to him, and Abel, the man who had raised him.

He'd talked about some of the other ranchers in the area, even mentioned a few folks in town that she might enjoy talking to, but the name 'Missy' had never come up.

She would have remembered it, she was certain.

Of course, that could have been merely an oversight on his part. Lilly was certain there were people in New York that *she* had forgotten to write about, but now that she had seen how close Missy seemed with the family, that was hard to believe.

She was no stranger to the ranch, she knew everyone by name, and she seemed genuinely surprised that Lilly hadn't heard of her before. That had to mean she was close with the family, surely.

So, *why* wouldn't Daniel have mentioned her, even in passing?

Her stomach twisted into knots as she remembered Missy's last words to her in the kitchen that evening. She'd made it seem like there was another woman in Daniel's history, perhaps a fiancée or a girl he was sweet on, and things hadn't worked out between them.

Could it be possible that Missy had been referring to herself?

Lilly frowned to herself, turning her head to the side to peer at the spot of darkness where she knew Daniel lay.

She didn't want to believe Daniel had deliberately held back information about a previous relationship from her, but it *would*

explain why he hadn't told her about Missy.

It would make sense, given how uncomfortable everyone had seemed when she had appeared on their doorstep, and it would fit with what she had said before.

She swallowed nervously as cold fear began to creep over her body. Was all of this a huge mistake?

She'd taken a gamble with Daniel, hoping he was the white knight she had always dreamed would sweep her off her feet and carry her far away from her lonely life, but now she was starting to regret that choice.

Now she was thousands of miles away from the only home she had ever known, without the means to return.

*What if something goes wrong again?* she wondered. *What if he leaves me, and I'm without a family again, just like before?*

**I**t was the sunlight that poured through the window of the bedroom that woke Daniel. He blinked against the glaring light and raised a hand slowly to try and shield his face from it, but it was too late.

He'd had his rude awakening at sunrise, and it served him right—he should have remembered to buy curtains before the wedding.

*The wedding.*

With a start, Daniel remembered the events of the day before. He was a married man now, and Lilly was his wife.

The beautiful girl who'd come all the way from New York for *him*, who was...

He turned ever so slightly to peek over his shoulder. Sure enough, there was a dozing figure laying there, with long blonde tresses covering her face.

Lilly was sleeping soundly beside him. His *wife* was sleeping beside him.



With a giddy smile, Daniel rolled onto his back and looked up at the ceiling, relaxing against the mattress.

Since he had first proposed the idea of marriage to Lilly all those weeks ago, he had been waiting for something to go wrong. Whether it was her deciding to never respond to his letter, or change her mind about arriving by train, he had been anxious.

Even when he had first met her, in those few seconds after he had seen her step off the train, he hadn't been able to quell the anxiety that perhaps she would just turn and flee at the first sight of him. Nothing had gone wrong, though.

Out of the corner of his eye, Daniel saw Lilly shifting around on the bed, and turned to see she was awake. She had pushed her hair back from her face with one hand and was smiling at him shyly, the sheets pulled all the way up to her chin.

"Hello," she whispered.

"Morning." He smiled. "Did I wake you? I didn't mean to."

"You didn't," she assured him. "I was already awake."

"I'm sorry about the curtains." He laughed, a little embarrassed by his total lack of preparation. "With everything I sort of... forgot about them."

"It's alright." She raised her head a little, peeking at the window. "I could make some for us."

"You could?"

"It shouldn't be too hard. If I can find some fabric and—"

“We have a fabric store in town.” He beamed at her. “I could take you, if you’d like.”

“I would, actually. I’d like that a lot.”

“Good.” The two shared small, shy smiles before Daniel got out of bed.

He decided it was best to give her some more privacy to dress herself; she still seemed a little nervous around him, so he didn’t want to make her uncomfortable.

Once they were both dressed, they set about having their first breakfast together as husband and wife.

Jill and Abel had provided them with a pantry of food, so Lilly prepared a pot of coffee with some eggs and sausages, and by the time Daniel made his way downstairs, the mouthwatering smell was wafting through the house.

“Oh good, you’re here just in time!” Lilly called out to him cheerily as he walked into the kitchen.

There were already two steaming mugs of coffee on the table, and as Daniel took his seat, Lilly put a plate in front of him with a flourish. “I hope you like it.”

“It smells delicious, thank you.” He grinned, watching as she took her own seat.

She pulled her chair in neatly before picking up her cutlery, and a few minutes of silence followed while they both tucked into their meal.

“I was thinking,” Daniel began, through a mouthful of food, “that I ought to take you out around town at some point.

“I know I gave you the tour of the place when we rode through together, but that doesn’t exactly feel like enough, does it? I could give you a proper tour, take you to all the shops, introduce you to some folks.”

“That sounds nice, I’d like that,” Lilly said, trailing off as though there was more she wanted to say.

She seemed to think better of it, though, and turned her attention back to the dish in front of her. Daniel shot her a curious look.

“Did you have another idea?”

“I... Well, when I was on the train, I was sat with these two lovely women, and I was just so taken aback by the beauty of this place.

“I suppose they must have seen that, because they suggested we ought to take a ride out toward the mountains and the forests on horseback.”

“Can you ride?” Daniel asked, impressed.

He enjoyed riding aimlessly on a sunny afternoon, seeing where the tracks took him. He did it alone mostly, but it would be nice to have some company.

Lilly blushed and admitted that she didn’t know how to ride a horse. She had a vague recollection of riding on horseback as a little girl, but that was about it.

“There wasn’t exactly a lot of call for it in my line of work,

unfortunately.”

“I could teach you, if you’d like,” Daniel suggested kindly. “You wouldn’t be the first person I’ve taught.”

“You’d do that?” Lilly’s expression brightened, and Daniel nodded.

“Of course. Perhaps this weekend, if you’d like?”

They fell into another silence after that, but it wasn’t the same stifling silence that had come over them the night before.

It wasn’t the kind of quiet where a person could hear every single noise, no matter how quiet. It wasn’t the kind of pause in conversation that made Daniel’s skin crawl.

It was just... calm.

Easy.

Relaxed.

And then, Lilly spoke up. She wasn’t looking at Daniel, but was pushing food around her plate with a fork instead. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course, anything.”

“What was your life like before you met me?” she asked, slowly turning her head up to look at him.

“I know you’ve lived at the ranch all your life, I know Abel and Jill are your family. But... we’ve never spoken much about your relationships, besides them of course.”

He felt his throat tighten at the mention of a relationship and ducked his head to look down at the table.

Over the weeks that they had written to each other, Daniel had considered telling Lilly about his past on more than one occasion, but the same fear had stopped him without fail every time.

He was always worried that the truth would scare her in some way and she would decide he was more trouble than he was worth, just like his mother had done.

So, in his letters, Daniel had been as vague as possible in his descriptions of his personal life. With the distance between them it hadn't been too difficult of a task, but it was different now they were together.

Now that Lilly sat across from him, with her chin resting delicately on the knuckles of her left hand and her eyes boring into him, he knew it would be much harder to evade the topic.

Sooner or later, she would realize that Abel was not really his father, and Jill was not his sister. Lilly was smart—it was almost a surprise she hadn't yet noticed the three looked nothing alike.

"I uh... " He cleared his throat and set down his cutlery, shrugging. "There isn't much to say."

"There isn't?" It didn't sound like she believed him, which wasn't surprising.

He was a terrible liar, and always had been. Abel loved him for it, and Jill had teased him about it ever since they had been children.

"There..." He sighed heavily, and looked up at her.

She was waiting for his response patiently, with a relaxed, almost vacant expression, which he supposed was a good thing. At least she didn't seem frustrated or angry with him.

"Well, I suppose there is a fair amount. But—and I hope I don't offend you when I say this—but I don't think that's something I'm ready to discuss."

Lilly blinked in surprise, and straightened up a little, cocking her head to one side. "You aren't?"

"No." He knew it was unfair.

Lilly had left everything to travel all the way to Colorado so that she could marry him, and Daniel wouldn't even give her the courtesy of explaining who he was to her. He ought to tell her; she was his wife now, after all, and she had a right to know the truth.

But when he opened his mouth, the same fear he'd felt all those times before sealed his throat shut, and he just closed it again.

*What if she can already see whatever it is about me that makes me unlovable?* he wondered, looking back down at the half-finished plate in front of him.

*What if I tell her what's happened to me, and everything just falls into place for her, and she leaves me?*

He didn't plan to keep her in the dark for long, though. As Daniel watched the disappointment cloud Lilly's features like an overcast winter day, he reminded himself that the secrecy would not last forever.

At some point, once he was ready, he would tell her everything.

At some point, but not today.

**A**fter breakfast, Jill collected Lilly from the house and brought her to the main property, where she was informed she would be expected to help for a few hours each day.

Jill wound her arm around Lilly's tightly and tugged her toward the door, waving at Daniel as they left, and it was all Lilly could do to follow.

"What will Daniel be doing, then," she asked as they walked back up the winding dirt path to the main house, "while we're working in here?"

"Oh, probably something involving dirt and nails," Jill said airily, waving her hand around to gesture across the ranch.

"That's one thing he probably never told you in those letters—he may look clean now, but rest assured, after a few hours out there, he'll be filthy. I don't even know how they all get so dirty, and I don't particularly want to find out."

Lilly giggled at that, looking out over the wide expanse of the ranch. Daniel had only ever given her a vague description of what his role at the ranch was, and what a daily routine for him looked



like.

He'd also failed to mention that it could be dirty work, although she supposed she couldn't really hold that against him. He'd wanted to make a good impression, after all.

"So, what will we be doing, then?" she asked as the two made their way into the main house. Jill laughed and gestured around again, this time with both hands.

"Oh, don't you worry, there's plenty here to do. There's sheets to be washed, clothes to be scrubbed, meals to be prepared—you won't be short of things to occupy yourself with."

As Jill spoke, Lilly's gaze fell on a small pile of clothes that lay on the countertop. "Are those to be cleaned?"

Jill wrinkled her nose. "No. They need to be stitched up. I was hoping to leave it for one of the other girls, though."

"You don't like sewing?" Lilly asked, plucking up one of the shirts between forefinger and thumb.

It was a thin cotton shirt, clearly well worn by the stains that had soaked into the fibres of the fabric, and along the left sleeve there was a sizable tear. "Is this even worth salvaging?"

"That depends on who you ask. I would say *no*," Jill smiled fondly at the shirt, "but Abel would lose his mind if we disposed of it."

"Would he be able to tell?" Lilly asked, turning it over in her hands.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about the shirt—it

looked just like any other work shirt a man might wear, except from where it had been worn thin at the elbows.

"It's his *lucky* shirt." Jill rolled her eyes, but she still smiled gently. "Well, at least that's what he'll tell you.

"It's the shirt of good fortune, and he always wears it on the first day of harvest."

"I wouldn't have thought of Abel as a superstitious man," Lilly admitted, picking up the sewing kit that had been left beside the shirts, "given what Daniel's told me about him—he's always described him as quite pragmatic."

"On most occasions, he is," Jill assured her. "But I suppose every man has his oddities."

"And what about Daniel? What's his 'oddity'?"

Jill paused for a beat, her hand hovering over the pile of shirts. She seemed surprised by the question, but regained her composure quickly enough. "What do you mean?"

"Has he been hurt by a woman?" Lilly asked directly. "Before he met me?"

Jill's features froze in a grimace of sorts and it took her a few moments longer to recover from the question. Lilly half-expected her to just brush it off and declare that there was nothing at all to concern herself with, but she didn't.

Her expression turned serious as she looked up, and then she sighed quietly.

“That isn’t my story to tell,” she said finally. “If you want to know more about Daniel’s life before he met you, then I suppose Daniel would be the person to ask.”

Lilly felt her heart speed up a little. She’d hoped Jill would just laugh it off so she could forget all about what Missy had said. She hadn’t denied it, though.

“I did. He didn’t want to talk about his past.”

“Well then, there’s nothing more that I can say,” Jill told her plainly. “If Daniel doesn’t want to talk about it, it certainly isn’t *my* place to tell you.”

With that, she gathered up the rest of the clothes and beckoned for Lilly to follow her through to the den, where they could make a start repairing the shirts for Abel and the others.

For a few moments, Lilly couldn’t move, though. She was stuck in place, frozen by the realization that what Missy had said to her was true, after all.

*I really didn’t know anything about him before I came here, she reminded herself, her fingers curling into the soft fabric of the shirt in her hands.*

*It seemed exciting then, traveling all this way to marry a man I knew nothing of. But now... What if this was all a terrible, horrible mistake?*

Daniel had been a married man for two and half days, and the words still felt strange in his mouth. He liked to say them, though; he liked to tell the other ranch hands about his *wife*, Lilly, and didn't try to hide the smile that stretched across his features when he did.

After the slightly uncomfortable conversation they had shared during their first breakfast, Lilly hadn't asked him anything more about his past, and instead stuck to topics that were a little less invasive.

Just because they weren't talking about his past, it didn't mean they were short on conversation.

They still had a combined forty-five years of life to share with each other, and each night they would sit up late on the porch, chatting away as they watched the stars twinkle above them.

Lilly told him that she'd never seen a sky so beautiful in all her life, and Daniel learned that in the city, there was a perpetual haze that hung above the tall buildings. She could see some stars on a clear night, but she'd never realized the night could look like this.

“It’s like someone spilled diamonds...” she’d breathed, staring up at them in wonder.

They talked about how fast life was in the city compared to the ranch. There was always something happening in the street outside her apartment, but over the years she’d grown used to the constant noise, had managed to almost forget about it until she’d traveled west.

She told him that it wasn’t until the first night, when she’d closed her eyes and realized she couldn’t hear people wandering about and yelling drunkenly to each other, that she understood for the first time just how quiet the ranch was.

Apparently, the ranch even smelled different to the city. With warm cheeks, Daniel had tried to politely explain that the smell was probably coming from the stables, but Lilly shook her head adamantly.

“It’s not that,” she assured him quickly. “I smelled it before we even got here; I knew it when we were in the town together. The air here just smells... different.

“It’s hard to explain, but it almost feels like it’s easier to breathe. Maybe it’s because there’s less out here. We aren’t all cramped on top of each other the way people are in the city.”

“Perhaps that’s it,” he conceded with a small smile.

She seemed to be enjoying her new life, taking everything in her stride, and he was glad that all of the sudden changes weren’t overwhelming for her.

He just wanted her to be happy.

That was why, after being married for two and a half days (or two days and eighteen hours, as he told Jill), Daniel made good on his promise to show Lilly the town.

Abel gave him the day off, and Jill did the same with Lilly, and together, they rode into town on the same cart they had used before.

Daniel pointed out a few of the places she might like to visit at some point, reminding her that if she wanted to write a letter to any friends back in New York, there was a train that left the town every morning, destined for the east coast.

They stopped at the bank, where Daniel reminded himself they would likely have papers to sign now that they were married, and then, finally, came to a stop outside the fabric shop.

“Old Mrs. Frankston used to run this place with her husband when I was a boy,” Daniel explained as they walked in.

“He passed on a few years ago and left the whole place to her, though—and if I’m honest, I think the place is better for it.”

“You do?”

He hummed in agreement, looking around the shop. “Mr. Frankston was a good man, but he had no business sense. Mrs. Frankston, on the other hand...

“Well, let’s just say that if there’s ever a woman who’s president, I’ll wager it’d be her.”

Lilly giggled at that, reaching out to run her hands over a roll of pale, creamy fabric. “I like the sound of her already.”

“I thought you might. She also has some contacts in the city, and a catalog of furniture that we can look through, if you’d like. You said you have an eye for these sorts of things.”

“Are you sure you trust me?” Lilly asked, almost teasingly. “What if I lied to you, and I have absolutely dreadful taste?”

“I don’t think you do,” he assured her, meeting her gaze with a smile. “After all, you fixed up that wedding gown, didn’t you?”

“Besides, Abel gave us a nice sum of money after the wedding so that we could make the place into a proper home. I reckon you’d do a better job at spending it than I would.”

“What would you spend the money on?” Lilly asked, picking up a roll of fabric to hold against the light, inspecting it a little more closely.

Daniel thought about it for a few moments, and then shrugged. “Maybe a new saddle for my horse.”

Lilly laughed at that. It wasn’t like the shy giggles and semi-smiles he’d seen and heard before, not at all.

This was a real laugh that came from deep in her chest, and Daniel watched as she shook her head slowly, almost as if she didn’t quite believe what she’d heard.

“Is that so? That’s a very lucky horse.”

They continued through the shop together like that, with Lilly picking up rolls of fabric that looked nearly identical to Daniel, peering at them with narrowed eyes for a moment before discarding one of them.

He had no idea what separated one roll from another, but Lilly seemed to know exactly what she was looking for, so he trailed behind her, watching in silent fascination.

That was, of course, until they heard a voice pipe up from just behind him, and both turned on the spot to see a familiar face.

“Oh, my! I never thought I’d see the day you stepped foot inside a store like this, Daniel!”

Even if he hadn’t recognized the voice, or the thin, reedy giggle that accompanied it, Daniel knew Missy instantly from the tightly coiled hair that hung around her face, bouncing with even the slightest movement.

“Hello, Missy,” he grunted, as coldly as he could manage. Why, of all the days, was she in this store *today*?

*Of all the bad luck in all the world...*

“Oh, look at this...” Missy pushed herself up against his side, clinging onto his arm tightly as she looked at the rolls of fabric he was holding. “Aren’t you sweet, carrying all of these for her?”

“Hello, Missy,” Lilly spoke up in a flat tone that matched Daniel’s. She didn’t seem too pleased to be interrupted, either.

“Oh, are you taking up a little home project?” Missy asked, with a tone that made Daniel grind his teeth.

In all of the years that Missy had been infatuated with him, he had picked up on her habits, and knew them better than he knew his own. One of the more irritating habits she had was the particular tone of voice she happened to take with other women.



She had a different way of speaking depending on who she was with—in a way, everyone did—but the complete change in Missy’s attitude was so exaggerated that it was almost dizzying to see.

When she spoke to her elders, she was polite and meek, like the perfect potential daughter-in-law. When she spoke to Daniel, she would bat her lashes, make every effort to get close to him, and outright flirted as much as possible.

But with other women, Missy was a completely different person. She spoke to them like they were children who couldn’t even begin to comprehend her, as though they couldn’t hope to match up to her.

It was like she saw every other woman as competition, and with even the tone of her voice, she was trying to belittle them. Daniel heard that same condescending tone now, when she spoke to Lilly.

“Lilly is making the drapes for *our* bedroom,” he informed Missy, taking a step away from her and shuffling a little closer to his wife. “She’s a talented seamstress.”

“Oh how *charming*,” Missy drawled, although it didn’t seem like a genuine compliment. “My father had a maid like that once.

“Unfortunately we had to let her go after she found herself in a bit of *trouble*. You remember the poor girl, don’t you, Daniel?

“From back when we were teenagers. In fact, I think you were visiting our house the day Father fired her.”

As she spoke, Daniel noticed Missy was edging her way toward him again, moving so slowly that he didn’t realize until she was touching him again. Just as before, he pulled himself away from

her grasp and moved up so that his arm was pressed flush with Lilly's.

Ordinarily he wouldn't have been particularly bothered by Missy's behavior—it was annoying, but mostly harmless.

It was entirely different now, in front of his wife. Now all of the giggling and flirting, and the constant need to try and touch him all felt uncomfortable, and incredibly inappropriate.

Daniel wanted nothing more than to take Lilly by the arm and drag her away that instant, but he still had an armful of fabric to pay for, and they hadn't even looked at the catalog yet.

"If you'll excuse us, Missy," he began, as firmly as he could manage, "we were hoping to spend the day alone. We have a lot to do."

An expression Daniel couldn't quite place flickered across Missy's features, but it was gone in an instant. Then, she smiled that big, bright, *cold* smile at him, and laughed.

"Oh of course. Don't mind me at all, I understand the two of you must need to spend this time getting to know each other.

"I mean, you're practically strangers, aren't you? I shouldn't intrude."

"We aren't strangers," Daniel said coldly. Missy raised an eyebrow at that, and her gaze flickered from him to Lilly for just a moment.

"Well, I only mean that you want to know as much about her as possible, Daniel. After all, I'd hate for you to have another woman just... walk out on you."

The comment came so casually, as though she was talking about the weather, but it struck Daniel like a blow to his stomach.

He had always known Missy knew some details of his mother, but he had refused to talk with her about it, so he was never sure how much she understood of the situation.

Clearly, though, it seemed she knew more than enough to hurt him.

The rolls of fabric slipped from his grasp and clattered to the floor around his feet. Beside him, he heard Lilly cry out in surprise, but he couldn't bring himself to look at her.

He couldn't find it in him to apologize, to gather himself up, to pretend like he was alright. The only thing he could do was run.

And so, with Lilly calling his name, he turned on his heel and left the store as quickly as possible, hearing the blood pound in his ears every step of the way.

The change that came over Daniel happened so suddenly that it took Lilly by surprise, and she hardly had the time to register that something was wrong before he fled the store, dropping the rolls of fabric as he did so.

She called after him as he rushed out, but he either didn't hear her voice or didn't care to answer her, because she couldn't stop him.

She wasn't quite sure what she was supposed to do. Should she follow him out into the street and comfort him, even though she had no idea what could have upset him so?

Should she give him a little space to cool off, or perhaps even ask Missy what on earth could be wrong?

Lilly opted to follow her new husband from the store. Once she was out on the main street of town, she spotted him by the carriage, which they had left on the other side of the road, just outside the post office.

His back was to her, but even though she couldn't see his face, she knew something was wrong with him.

Daniel was leaning heavily against the carriage, and as she approached him tentatively, Lilly saw his shoulders heave with deep, labored breaths.

Lilly crossed the street, calling his name quietly again. “Daniel?”

His shoulders stiffened at the sound of her voice, and hunched up instinctively toward his ears. He turned his head just a little to peek at her over his shoulder, but didn’t look at her properly.

It was almost as if he couldn’t bring himself to look, like he was trying to hide.

“Daniel, what’s wrong?” she asked gently, taking another step closer. At that sound, though, Daniel flinched again and shook his head tersely.

“Don’t,” he said, his voice harsher than she had heard it before. “Please, I just.... I just need a few moments alone.”

Lilly hesitated, her hand outstretched to touch his shoulder comfortingly. Although that was her natural instinct, it sounded as though that was the last thing he needed—or wanted, for that matter—so she pulled her hand back, frowning.

“Is there something I can do?”

“No.”

Lilly took a step back, giving him the space he so clearly needed. There was something that Daniel had hidden from her during all of those letters, she was certain of that now.

And worse than that, she was sure it had something to do with

Missy. Why else would he be behaving like this now?

Once more, Lilly found herself struck by the same cold sense of dread as she had done during their breakfast together, despite the hot sun.

*What if this was all a horrible, terrible mistake?*

It wasn't the first time she'd had that thought since arriving in Colorado.

Pre-wedding jitters were apparently normal—many women had already assured her of that—but was she supposed to be feeling this uncertain about her decision after the papers had already been signed? Surely this wasn't normal, was it?

*What is he keeping from me?* she wondered, *Is it possible that he had a relationship with Missy before and it didn't work out? Is that the reason he's been so secretive with me?*

She knew now that he had been hurt by a woman before he had met her, and it seemed more and more obvious that the woman who had pained him was Missy.

Perhaps he was still wounded by whatever it was that she had done to him, and he was unable to move on.

If that was true, then perhaps this marriage really was a terrible idea. If Daniel couldn't love her because his heart had been so badly hurt by another woman, then what hope was there for them to have a family together?

Once more, just like back in New York, Lilly saw her chances of managing to have a family slipping further and further away.

Lilly looked from Daniel's still shaking shoulders to the store they had both fled. It was then that she caught sight of Missy again, now exiting the shop herself.

It didn't look as though she'd bought anything inside, and rather than carrying on with her day, she leaned against the storefront with her arms folded daintily over one another, her eyes trained on Daniel.

Lilly felt something flare up deep within her that she was very unaccustomed to, and the intensity of the emotion took her by surprise. It was anger.

As she looked over at Missy and saw her surveying the scene like a theatergoer, Lilly felt a surge of determination in the pit of her belly. She was going to get to the bottom of this.

She made her way across the street to Missy, gathering her skirts up above her ankles as she did so, and came to a stop right in front of the other woman.

She stared into Missy's icy blue eyes for a few moments, and then drew in a slow breath before speaking.

"What did you mean by that?"

Missy must have watched her approach from the other side of the street; there was no way she could have missed the fury in Lilly's eyes as she had done so.

Nonetheless, when Lilly came to an abrupt stop in front of her, she didn't look even a little bit perturbed. She simply smiled thinly, like she was watching her favorite play unfold before her eyes.

"What did I mean by *what*?"

"Since I arrived in Colorado, the way you've spoken about Daniel..." Lilly wasn't sure how to vocalize her suspicions to this woman, and she struggled to find the right words for a few moments.

"You're very... familiar with him."

Missy laughed at that—at least, Lilly assumed that was the sound she heard from the other woman. It was unlike any laugh she'd heard before, though; it was thin and cold, and sounded completely forced.

"Is something funny?"



Missy shook her head at that, and tightly coiled brown locks bounced around her face as she did so. “You might say so, yes.”

“Well, would you be so kind as to explain exactly what it is that you find so funny?”

“Oh, I don’t think we have the time.” Missy slowly tilted her head to one side, looking Lilly up and down. “But to be honest with you, I just find it so... well, *funny* isn’t even the right word for it.

“I find it *bizarre* that Daniel chose to marry you. Why else do you think I stopped by the ranch that evening? I simply had to see for myself if the news was true.”

Everything about Missy, from the way she was scrutinizing Lilly’s appearance so closely to the condescending tone of her voice, all reminded Lilly a little too much of a young girl she’d known when she had attended school.

Her name was Moira, and she had been one of the most insufferable and cruel people Lilly had ever had the misfortune of encountering.

Lilly couldn’t help but feel as if she was about to endure the same schoolyard bullying all over again now that she was stood in front of Missy.

“Why is that?” Lilly asked. “Why was it so bizarre to you?”

Missy clicked her tongue and shook her head slowly, in a move that seemed *almost* sympathetic. “Oh, you poor sweet girl. No one told you, did they?”

All of a sudden, Lilly was becoming very aware of her own body.

The hairs on her forearms and along the back of her neck rose to attention despite the heat of the early afternoon.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she swore she could *hear* the beating of her heart. And, of course, she felt the same nausea that always followed this kind of intense anxiety.

All she could manage to say, in a voice so quiet that it betrayed her nerves, was, “Tell me what?”

“Well, about the engagement, of course! I suppose I should say, ‘the engagement that never was,’ because I never gave him the chance to ask.”

Her heart was beating so quickly that it almost hurt now, and Lilly could feel her hands begin to tremble at her sides. “Daniel was going to ask *you*—”

“We’ve known each other for so long, I suppose it was only natural that the poor boy thought we would be married one day.

“Most folks in town thought the same thing, and I suppose all of the whispering and gossip must have gotten into his head.

“I should shoulder my portion of the blame, of course; I should have told him plainly from the start that I’ve never had any intention of marrying him.”

“Daniel proposed?” Lilly’s voice was weak when she asked the question, even though she already knew the answer.

This was the explanation for the strange behavior, the inability to open up about his past. Missy was the woman who had hurt him.

“Of course, this all only happened a few short months ago, so you can imagine my surprise when I saw the two of you in town, and then heard the news that you had been married.

“I just felt so surprised that Daniel would be able to find a bride so soon after I had hurt him so badly.”

“A few months ago?” Lilly echoed, turning on the spot to look over at Daniel, who still had his back to them.

From where she could see him, he was still leaning over the carriage—gripping onto it for dear life, in fact.

“A part of me regrets that things didn’t work out with him,” Missy said casually, drawing Lilly’s attention back to her.

She was still leaning nonchalantly against the wall of the store, as though she hadn’t just given Lilly such shocking news. “He would make a fantastic husband, I’m sure.

“But... I suppose I lost my chance, didn’t I? Now he’s made his choice, and settled for you.”

With that, she stepped away from the wall and dusted her hands off, as though even talking about the entire situation had left her feeling dirty.

She looked across the street at Daniel for a few moments, and then glanced back at Lilly.

“I do feel bad for you, having come all this way to marry a man who still remains so brokenhearted...”

A sigh left Missy’s lips, and then, without another word, she turned

on her heel and left Lilly standing there alone on the street, with only the new knowledge for company.

In only a few short sentences, Missy had managed to shatter whatever image of Daniel Lilly had begun to build, and now she was left feeling just as uncertain, vulnerable, and alone as she had done when she had first stepped off the train in Colorado.

She truly had married a stranger after all, and now she didn't even know why he had wanted to marry her in the first place.

She had never asked him why he had taken to using the service—it had seemed rude to ask that of a man she didn't know—but now Lilly wished that she had done.

*Did he marry me so he didn't have to feel so alone? After Missy rejected him, did he simply feel like this was a last resort? Or was this a way to—*

Lilly shook her head sharply, stopping herself before she got too carried away.

She didn't even want to entertain the thought that Daniel was using this marriage for ulterior motives in some way. But as she stood across the street from her husband, she couldn't help but let the dark thoughts in.

*Did he marry me as some form of revenge? Was this a way to get back at her?*

Daniel should have known something was wrong with Lilly when they made their way home that afternoon, having bought nothing from the store.

Unfortunately, even once he had gathered himself enough to look at her, he couldn't focus on anything other than what Missy had said to him.

It wasn't until they made their way back to the ranch and Lilly hopped off the carriage without his help, disappearing off toward their house without looking at him, that he realized something was not quite right. She seemed... almost angry, upset even.

*Of course she's upset, you idiot,* he scolded himself, watching his new wife rush away. *With the way you behaved back there, anyone would be.*

After handing Harriet over to one of the ranch hands so she could be returned to the stable, Daniel went to the same place he always did when he was feeling confused, or upset, or angry—he went to Abel's office.

He kicked the mud off his boots at the door before entering the

main house, and then headed straight to the room at the back.

He knocked twice but pushed the door open without even waiting for a response to see Abel in his usual spot behind his desk, leafing through papers. The old man looked up in surprise at the sound of Daniel storming in uninvited, and cocked his head to one side.

“You look upset,” he said slowly, glancing behind Daniel as though the reason for his mood was about to follow him through the door. “You want to sit down?”

“No.” Daniel closed the door behind him and pulled his hat off, gripping it between both hands nervously. “I don’t think I’d be able to sit still if I tried.”

“Somethin’ the matter?” Abel rested his elbows on the desktop and peered up at Daniel. “I thought you were goin’ fabric shopping with your pretty young wife.”

“We *were*, but then—” Daniel let out a low groan and threw himself down into the chair across from Abel. “We ran into Missy again.”

“*Oh*.” Abel’s eyes widened at the mention of Missy. “That girl...

“She’s always had a way of getting under your skin. I’ve known since you were children, that girl’d be nothin’ but trouble as she got older.”

“Well, you were right about that,” Daniel muttered darkly. “She sure is enjoying herself, and driving me half insane in the process.”

“Did she say something? Is that why you’re in this state?”

“She—” Daniel paused, frowning.

The comment had been one about his mother, a thinly-veiled criticism of her that had stung. But if he was honest, that wasn’t what had upset him so much.

He could handle comments about his mother, he’d heard enough of them from some of the meaner boys as a child. If Missy had left it at that, he would have been fine, more or less.

But she hadn’t left it at that—she had brought Lilly into the matter.

It was like she knew exactly what would hurt him the most, bringing up his mother and his new bride in the same breath, drawing the same comparison that he had been doing for years. What if Lilly left him, just as his mother had done?

“I want to make Lilly happy,” he said finally. “I want her to have a good life here.”

“That’s not an unreasonable thing for a man to want.”

“But how am I supposed to make that happen, Abel?” Daniel asked quietly, looking down at the hat he still clutched between his hands.

“How can I make sure she’s happy here, when I’m constantly worried that she might just walk away one day?”

Abel drew in a slow, deep breath through his nose before slowly leaning back in his chair. The wood creaked beneath his weight as he settled himself, thinking about how to respond.

“This is about your mother again? Did Missy say something to

you?”

“Does that matter? What if she’s right? What if I’ve got good reason to be worried? How can I relax enough around her to make her happy if I’m constantly worrying about whether or not she even wants to spend the afternoon with me?”

Abel chuckled, shaking his head. “You know, it may feel like you’re the only man in the world who has that fear but I guarantee that you ain’t, son.

“There’s gotta be at least a half-dozen newlyweds out there who are fretting about whether their wife *likes* them, let alone *loves* ‘em.”

“Were you like that?” Daniel asked hesitantly.

For a man who always spoke of his wife so fondly, even all these years after she had passed, he wondered if Abel had ever had *any* doubts about their marriage.

“No,” he admitted, smiling. “But then again, she never gave me any reason to worry. And more importantly, I never gave *her* a reason to think that I didn’t love her.

“Marriage can be a beautiful thing, Daniel, but it takes time, and a lot of effort. You understand?”

“Not really.”

Abel laughed at that. “A marriage is like anything. You’ve got to work at it every day, little by little.

“Don’t worry so much about all the bad things that *might* happen,



things that are outside of your control. At the end of the day, you can't force a person to stay somewhere where they don't want to be, but you *can* try your damndest to make them want to stay.

“Don't worry about the fact that she might *one day* decide she wants to leave—focus on the things you *know* you can do to make her happy while she's here.”

Daniel shifted uncomfortably in his seat. When he'd come to Abel's office seeking some wisdom, he'd hoped the older man would tell him there would be nothing to worry about, that Lilly would never walk away from him.

He was hoping to hear that he would never have to face the pain of abandonment again, but that wasn't what he got.

“What if I do all the right things, and she still leaves?” he asked quietly. “What if I do everything I can to make her happy, and she still doesn't want to stay?”

“Well, then it doesn't sound like a problem with you, it sounds like a problem with *her*,” Abel pointed out. Daniel couldn't really take a whole lot of comfort in that.

“So you're telling me I could do everything right and she could still walk away from me? She could wake up one morning, roll over and look at me, and say to herself ‘I don't want this anymore?’”

Daniel shook his head in disbelief. Abel had never sat him down and told him that harsh reality before, not in all the years he had tried to help Daniel find a wife.

“Sorry, son.” The old man smiled. “That's just how people are. Not just wives, but friends, business partners, family members.

“Folks are fickle, always have been. Sometimes, there’s just nothing you can do that’ll make them stay.”

“I wish you’d told me that sooner,” Daniel admitted bitterly. Abel laughed at that, rocking back in his chair again.

“If I’d told you that, you never would have even spoken to a girl, let alone gone out and *married* one, would you?” he pointed out. “Listen to me son.

“I’m telling you there’s a chance—a small chance—that things might not work out, even with all the good fortune in the world.

“You could buy her the biggest house in town, shower her with all the gifts money can buy, and make her the happiest woman in the world, and perhaps one day, she might still decide she doesn’t want to stay.

“That’s a possibility, yes. But what do you think is gonna happen if you don’t even try to make her happy here?”

Daniel looked up slowly, and met Abel’s gaze. “She’ll leave for sure.”

“Exactly.” The old man smiled brightly. “It’s a terrifying thing, to pour your heart into something when you’ve got no way of knowing if it’ll last.

“I think it takes a certain kind of bravery that few men are willing to admit they have, but if you can find it in yourself, you might be onto a wonderful thing.”

Daniel swallowed hard, slowly tracing his fingertips over the lines of his hat. “I want to be a good husband.”

“I know you do. And I reckon Lilly’s a smart enough girl to know that, too, by now.” Abel motioned toward the door.

“So, why don’t you quit feeling sorry for yourself and figure out a way to start being a good husband, hm?”

When they'd first returned to the ranch, Lilly hadn't felt much like working. She hadn't felt like doing much at *all*, except for laying in bed staring up at the ceiling above her.

There was no possible way she could focus on work—not when Missy's words echoed in her head over and over again, taunting her and goading her.

She wanted answers, but she wasn't going to get them from Daniel. It was like he was determined to keep himself closed off to her.

Of course, Missy herself had given away almost no real information that was of any use, and her encounter had only left Lilly with more questions than she had started with.

There was one person, though, one person who seemed to know Daniel better than anyone. Perhaps she could ask Jill.

Lilly couldn't help but feel a little uncertain about broaching the topic with Jill again. After all, the last time she had pushed to find out a little information about Daniel's past, Jill had told her that it wasn't *her* story to tell.

She really didn't have a reason to hope that Jill would be able or willing to provide answers, but what other choice did she have?

As nervous as she was about pressing on to find out information about her new husband, Lilly had to at least try. Not knowing anything would drive her insane sooner or later.

So, with a heavy sigh, she pulled herself out of bed and straightened her dress before making her way to the main house.

While she walked up the narrow dirt path, holding one hand above her face to shield her eyes from the sun, Lilly looked out over the fields. She could see a few men working out there, but from a distance, none of them looked like Daniel.

After their rather disastrous trip into town, Lilly had been too upset to even think about asking his plans for the rest of the day, but she hoped he was working with the other men.

She didn't feel up to talking with him just yet.

The house was cool when Lilly made her way into the main hall, and quiet, too. She paused in the doorway, listening out for any sign of Daniel, but when she couldn't hear his voice, she wandered a little further inside, in search of Jill.

Lilly could smell Jill before she found her—or, more accurately, she could smell the polish Jill was using to clean silverware in the den. When Lilly walked in, she spotted the other woman hunched over the table, furiously scrubbing at a spoon.

"That smells terrible."

"I know, I know," Jill grumbled. "I tried working outside, but it's

just too hot. I've opened the windows, I was hoping that would help to air out the room a little."

"It doesn't seem to be working." Lilly sat beside her on the floor, crossing her legs beneath her. "Do you need a hand?"

"*Please*. I feel like I do this every week, and we never even use this silverware, but Abel still wants it polished. And it's so *difficult*. Should it be this hard?"

Despite her nerves, Lilly smiled gently. Mrs. Casson had owned a fine set of silverware that had been given to her as a wedding gift.

Like Abel, she rarely used it, but on more than one occasion, Lilly had seen the family maid struggling to polish it. From memory, it *was* quite hard, although Lilly hadn't had the luxury of ever owning any for herself.

She picked up a polishing cloth and a fork, inspecting it. "If we don't ever use these, then why keep them?"

"I used to ask the same thing when I was a teenager. Abel told me he kept them around because they made a decent punishment for me."

"Punishment?"

"Mmh..." she hummed, inspecting a spoon. "Daniel and I were caught stealing fruit when we were young, and it's the only time in my life I ever thought Abel would yell at us.

"He was so angry, his whole face went red. When he got us back to the house, he sat me down at the table, brought out each piece of silverware, and told me to clean them.

"If he couldn't see his face in them," she added, "I'd have to start over."

Lilly couldn't help but laugh at that idea as she looked Jill up and down slowly, considering her as a child. She could perhaps imagine as a young girl that Jill would have been the type to steal fruit, but the idea of Daniel doing it was simply bizarre to her.

"And what was Daniel's punishment?"

Jill grinned. "Chickens."

"Chickens?"

"When we were young, Daniel was... Well, he was terrified of chickens."

For a moment, Lilly forgot all about the trip into town that day, and the reason she'd come to speak to Jill in the first place. "Excuse me?"

"He's grown out of it now, or at least, that's what he tells everyone. But he used to hate them, apparently it was because of their eyes."

"He didn't like the way they looked at him, apparently they always seemed so cold and calculating. He didn't like not being able to tell what they were thinking."

"He was *petrified* as a boy, so for a full week, Abel had him feeding them and collecting eggs," she explained.

"Did it work?"

"What do you think?" Jill giggled. "I once suggested going back to

the place we'd gotten the apples from in the first place, and you'd think I'd suggested we murder a man.

"He went as white as a ghost. *I* think he's still terrified of the idea that Abel will ever make him spend a week taking care of chickens again."

The two women shared a laugh at that and Lilly felt her spirits lift, just a little bit. But then, as their chuckles died down and they turned back to her work, she remembered why she was there.

There was something important that she needed to talk to Jill about, and she couldn't put it off any longer.

"I know you told me that if I wanted to know about Daniel's past then I should ask him," she began hesitantly, glancing at Jill out of the corner of her eye. "I understand that, and I respect it."

Jill paused over the stove, and Lilly thought she saw the other woman's shoulders stiffen just a little. She straightened up, folded her polishing cloth neatly into a small square, and set it down on the table before turning to look at Lilly properly.

When she did, there was a curious look on her face.

Lilly had half-expected the other woman to be annoyed that they would be going over this again, but she didn't *seem* angry or frustrated. Instead, she looked almost sad.

"I stand by what I said. If Daniel hasn't told you, then I—"

"It's not your place, I know that." Lilly worried her lower lip between her teeth for a moment, feeling conflicted.



On the one hand, she wanted to respect her husband's privacy. He obviously had his reasons for not giving her the full story of his life before they had met, and she needed to respect that.

On the other hand, though, the curiosity that burned in the pit of her belly only grew stronger with each day she spent in Colorado.

"Did something happen?" Jill asked, cocking her head to one side. "Did he say anything to you?"

Lilly opened her mouth, ready to tell Jill everything that had occurred earlier that day when they had gone into town.

It seemed strange that only a few short hours ago she was so happy and relaxed, allowing Dnaiel to lead her around town as he showed her everything he thought she might enjoy, and now she just felt so confused.

When she opened her mouth to relay the whole sorry affair to Jill, though, something entirely different came out of her mouth.

"Was he hurt by a woman?"

"Excuse me?" The question seemed to take Jill by surprise almost as much as it shocked Lilly, and for a moment the two women just stared at each other in silence.

"Before Daniel began writing to me, did a woman... hurt him?" Lilly paused, suddenly anxious all over again.

It felt like she was treading on forbidden territory here, stepping where she didn't belong without Daniel knowing.

She almost didn't want to know the answer, she didn't want to

have Missy's story confirmed, but she couldn't quash that curious part of her brain, the part that pushed her forward.

And her curiosity paid off—she got her answer, although it wasn't the answer she had hoped for.

Jill's brow furrowed into a line, and then she nodded, pursing her lips. "Yes. Yes, he was hurt."

*He had been hurt. Was everything Missy said true?*

Lilly was surprised by how quickly she felt her heart sink to the pit of her stomach at the words.

She felt oddly disappointed in the realization that Missy and Daniel had been involved and their relationship had ended poorly for him—more disappointed than she would have expected, given how little they knew each other.

*If she told the truth about their relationship, then was she right about Daniel's reasons for marrying me as well?*

If Daniel had wanted to take Missy as his wife before he had written to Lilly, then that was none of her concern. She had no business concerning herself with the matters that had transpired before she and Daniel had written to each other for the first time.

But if Daniel had only ever married her as some sort of revenge, a way of making Missy jealous...

Her stomach turned at the thought. To be used like that, for someone else's gain... The idea was humiliating.

That wasn't what a marriage was supposed to be, and it certainly

wasn't what she'd envisioned her own marriage to look like.

A marriage was supposed to be a union between two people, an agreement to support each other. It wasn't supposed to be a way to hurt someone.

*A marriage is supposed to be about love.*

Lilly thought about her own parents' marriage. Her mother and father had been two very different people, but in a strange way, that might have been what made their bond such a strong one.

Her father had been a quiet, calculating businessman, bordering on stoic at times. He didn't feel the need to raise his voice or speak unnecessarily—when he *did* open his mouth, he only ever needed a few sentences to get his point across.

Perhaps that was why he had been considered such a shrewd and respectable businessman.

Her mother had been an entirely different person, from what Lilly remembered. She was louder, more gregarious, and she'd pushed her husband, encouraging him in every aspect of his life.

Lilly had memories from her childhood of her mother shooing her father out of the house one afternoon, after finding him cooped up in the study.

*"It's not healthy for a man like yourself to hunch over that desk from dawn until dusk!"* she'd cried out, flapping a cloth in his direction to chase him out into the sun.

From what Lilly could remember, her father had snuck a book out with him under his shirt, and had sat in a shady patch of their

garden to continue reading in peace.

They were such different people—one introverted and thoughtful, the other carefree and sociable.

She had hoped to find the same kind of balance in her own marriage with Daniel. Perhaps they were not quite as different as her parents had been, but she had noticed a few parallels.

Daniel was a businessman just like her father had been—in his first few letters to Lilly, he had spoken about a deal he was managing with a neighbouring ranch.

He had been nervous, but at the same time excited to prove his worth. She'd appreciated that quality about him.

Despite their differences, her parents had seemed happy in their marriage, and Lilly had hoped to find that same harmony with Daniel in time.

But if all of this was true, and their marriage was nothing more than an act of petty, malicious revenge, would that even be possible?

Would she be able to stay married to a man who was still in love with another woman who had rejected him, especially if that rejection had warped his feelings into something dark and horrible?

*Don't get too carried away*, Lilly told herself sternly. Even if all of this was true, there was still hope for their marriage.

If she was able to help Daniel to move on from that painful rejection, then perhaps there could be a future for them, after all.

Perhaps their relationship could actually blossom into something real.

“Do you think...” Her voice wavered a little as she spoke up again; she wasn’t entirely certain that she wanted to know the answer to her next question.

“Do you think, even though he was hurt... that he has the capacity to love, still? To love another woman?”

Jill was one of the people who probably knew Daniel the best in the world, so if anyone would be able to give Lilly a little insight into his motivations, it would be her.

When Lilly looked over and saw Jill’s expression turn into a pained grimace, she felt her heart sink. That couldn’t mean anything good.

The other woman didn’t answer Lilly straight away, and couldn’t even look up to meet her gaze as she considered what to say.

She must have only been waiting for an answer for a few moments, but as the seconds ticked by, Lilly could have sworn they stretched out further and further in front of her, until the silence was agonizing.

“Jill?”

Slowly, the other woman lifted her head and looked into Lilly’s eyes. Her deeply furrowed brow and pursed lips weren’t exactly encouraging.

“Daniel is a stubborn man, and he’s a fool at times. But I think if you want for this marriage to work, and it seems like you do... then you’ll simply have to be patient, and keep working with him.

If it's meant to be, then things will work out for you both."

That wasn't the comforting answer Lilly had been hoping for when she'd decided to ask for Jill's advice. In fact, if she was honest, it didn't answer her question at all—she still felt no closer to understanding her new husband than she had done before.

Even worse, she now couldn't even be sure if her efforts to make this marriage work would just prove futile.

Jill must have noticed that her answer had done little to lift Lilly's mood, because she walked around the table and laid a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry I can't be of more help.

"Daniel's a difficult man to understand, he's not like any other man I've ever met. Understanding that and coming to terms with it is half the battle with him, so if you can do that, being married to him might just become a little bit easier."

With that, she squeezed Lilly's shoulder and stepped back, smiling kindly.

"Now, why don't you go fetch the sheets from your house, and we can wash them? There's a good breeze in the air; they'll be as dry as the desert by lunch."

She was trying to brighten Lilly's mood, trying to distract her from the struggles of navigating newly married life, and Lilly appreciated that. Jill needn't have wasted her time, though—Lilly could still feel her stomach churning with anxiety.

Since she had arrived, had she had a real moment of peace, where her mind wasn't whirring with horrible thoughts and worries? Had she been able to relax for even a day?

It was difficult, but for Jill's benefit Lilly pushed her unease back and forced herself to smile. "That's a good idea. I'll head down to the house now, I won't be long."

Leaving Jill in the kitchen, Lilly headed out of the main house and down the little dirt path that led to Daniel's home.

*Daniel's home.* Lilly shook herself sternly. *It's not Daniel's home now, it's our home. It's the home we share together, it's the home we'll start a family in.*

Even Lilly didn't believe it, though, as she repeated those words to herself over and over again on the approach to the house.

The little voice in the back of her head, the optimistic part of her that had decided to take this leap of faith in the first place, was growing fainter and fainter, almost like it was fading into the background.

When she made her way up the porch steps, another voice spoke up. It was the voice of concern, the pessimistic part of her that had questioned whether this whole affair was a mistake from the very beginning.

*If all of what Missy said is true, will you really want this place to be the home where you raise your children?*

Lilly hesitated on the first step up to the porch, her hand wavering over the railing. She looked at the small house in front of her and frowned, sighing quietly.

Daniel had built this house with his own two hands as a place to live with his future wife. It was built purposely to be a marital home, but that didn't necessarily mean it was built to be *her*

marital home.

*Did he build this place with a specific woman in mind? she wondered. When he nailed these steps together, was he imagining walking up them hand in hand with Missy?*

Was Daniel disappointed the first night that they came back to this house? Had he been picturing a different wedding night, with a woman he had been in love with for years?

Lilly shuddered at the thought and shook her head sharply, trying to pull herself together.

“Stop it,” she scolded herself out loud, gripping the grainy wooden railing with one hand. “Pull yourself together.”

It was no use, though. Whatever sense of bravado she was trying to muster fell flat as she crossed the threshold of the house and looked around, glancing into the front room first, and then the kitchen.

The house was so sparsely decorated, it hardly looked like a home at all. It certainly wasn't the warm, cozy home she'd always dreamed of.

On her first night in town, she had dismissed the lack of decor as a simple lack of forethought on Daniel's part. He was a rancher, a man who had probably never stopped to appreciate the interior of a house in his life.

Now, though, she couldn't help but doubt whether that was the truth. What if this wasn't a lack of forethought, but a lack of effort?

Perhaps when he had realized that he would never have a chance



at marrying Missy, Daniel had simply opted not to bother decorating the house at all, because he didn't care enough about his new marriage to do so.

That thought filled Lilly with a cold sense of dread, right in the pit of her stomach. A now all too familiar question popped into her mind—*was this a mistake?*—and she felt tears begin to well in her eyes, blurring the near-empty house from view.

How much longer would she be able to live with this uncertainty of not knowing how Daniel truly felt about her, not knowing whether he really wanted her as his wife?

Daniel looked down at the bouquet of flowers in his hands and sighed to himself. Abel's words still echoed around in his head, and while they hadn't necessarily been the ones he had *wanted* to hear, he knew they were what he *needed* to hear.

Ultimately, he couldn't control whether or not Lilly stayed in Colorado with him. He couldn't force her to stay if she didn't want to, but he could try to show her that he was worth staying for.

He had to admit, even though he'd been worried about everything working out, he hadn't really prepared all that much for her arrival. He hadn't thought to give their new house any kind of warmth or anything that would be inviting to her.

Even the flowers he had brought her on her arrival had been picked hastily as a last-minute gesture, and it had shown. If he wanted to make her happy—and he did—he would have to put in the effort.

The bouquet of wildflowers in his hands wasn't much, but it was a start.

After he'd spoken with Abel, Daniel had decided to head back into

the fields for a few more hours of work, and on his way back to the house, he'd stopped every few feet to gently pluck a particularly bright flower from the grass.

He was still nervous as he made his way up toward the house, and his natural instinct was to clutch the flowers in a vice-like grip to try and steady his hands, but Daniel stopped himself. *If you do that, you'll crush them just like you did before. Be gentle with them this time.*

There was a cowardly part of Daniel that didn't want to go home. He didn't want to see how upset his new wife was after what had happened earlier that afternoon, even though he knew it was important to talk to her as soon as possible.

If he turned and hid in the main house like he wanted, things would only be worse.

*You can't control how upset she's going to be,* he reminded himself as he slowly made his way up the porch steps. *But you can apologize, and try to make things right.*

Daniel took a deep breath to steady his nerves, then pushed the front door open. Although it was foolish, part of him hoped he could press the flowers into her hands, mumble an apology, and go on with the rest of the evening as though nothing had happened.

When he walked into the house, though, and spotted Lilly in the kitchen scrubbing away at the bench, he had a sinking suspicion it wouldn't be that easy.

He cleared his throat loudly and held up one hand in a nervous wave when she turned to look at him. From across the room, he couldn't quite read the expression on her face.

She looked caught somewhere between anger and sadness, with her brow furrowed until he could see deep lines.

"I thought you might like these," he said quietly, holding out the flowers like they were a peace offering.

Lilly's expression softened just a little as she looked down at them, and after a moment's hesitation, she crossed the room to take them from him.

"They're lovely, Daniel," she whispered. "Thank you."

"I didn't even crush the stems this time," he pointed out. Lilly smiled at that, but there was something about it that didn't quite seem genuine.

The corners of her mouth pulled up into a small smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. They looked just as sad as before.

"Are you angry with me?" Daniel asked anxiously, swallowing hard. He almost didn't want to hear the answer. "About what happened in town today?"

"I'm not *angry*," Lilly assured him, finally looking up to meet his gaze. "But I am... Well, I suppose I'm confused."

"Confused?"

"I just feel like you aren't..." She paused, sucking in a slow breath and almost wincing as she did. "I feel like you aren't being completely honest with me."

*I'm not*, he wanted to say. *I'm not, and I'm sorry. I'm sorry for making you feel so confused and lost, when I should be the one person you can*

*trust here.*

“I know Missy upset you.” Lilly’s voice was soft as she set the flowers down on the table beside them, and with both hands free, she wrapped them around her middle, almost as if she was hugging herself. “But I suppose I still don’t quite understand *why*.”

Guilt surged through Daniel’s body as he looked at his new wife.

Standing there in front of him, she just looked so small and vulnerable, and so utterly *lost*, that he wished he could gather her up in his arms and apologize for everything that had happened that day, and make her feel just a little bit better.

But to do that, he would have to explain everything. If he wanted to help her understand him, and to understand everything that had happened that day, he would have to tell her every sad, sorry detail of his life.

He would have to lay out the details of how his own mother had abandoned him, leaving him to be raised by a stranger.

*Perhaps a braver man than me would be able to do that*, he thought bitterly. *If I was braver, perhaps I wouldn’t feel quite so humiliated by all of this. And yet, I do.*

“I’m sorry,” he whispered finally. “I’m sorry for making you feel like this. I’m sorry I brought you all the way out here, and now you’re... you’re so sad, because of me.”

Lilly didn’t look quite so upset with him now, or perhaps it was just his imagination. She was still hugging her arms around her middle, though, almost like a protective measure.

"I'm not *sad*. I just want to understand you a little better, but every time I try to do that, I can't help but feel like you start to pull away from me a little more."

Abel was right, after all. Of course, Daniel suspected that he would be—the old man had never led him astray before.

Now he was certain, though; if he wanted this marriage to work, he was going to have to open himself up to Lilly, as terrifying as that concept sounded to him.

*It's time to be brave.*

"Would you join me out on the porch?" he asked, motioning back toward the hallway. "We could talk out there, if you like."

Lilly looked past him for a moment before nodding. "Alright."

It was the best time of day to sit out on the porch, and since building the house, it was a place Daniel found himself often. He liked watching the sun set from the front of his house, stretching out his legs and relaxing after a long day of work.

It was one of the few places on earth where he always felt like he was at peace, which was why it was the place he often came to think about his future.

Hopefully, it would be a good place to open up a little to his new wife, as well.

The sun was just starting to set as they made their way out onto the porch, side by side. Daniel stooped low to dust off any dirt he'd tracked onto the front steps, and then they sat together, settling down against the worn wood in silence.

This was supposed to be their home together, but as they sat there, Lilly couldn't help but doubt this place would ever really become that.

Perhaps Daniel could see that worry written on her features, because he reached out and took her hand, the one that lay on the wooden step between them.

His fingers curled around hers, and he squeezed lightly before speaking. "I'm glad you're here, you know."

"You are?" Lilly couldn't keep the surprise from her voice as she looked over at him.

With all the secrecy, and after conversation with Missy, she'd been starting to wonder if he was regretting this whole thing.

"Of course I am," Daniel assured her. He squeezed her hand again

and stroked his thumb over her knuckles in a slow, tender movement.

“I was nervous at first—I think I still *am* nervous, to tell you the truth—but I’m glad, nonetheless.”

“Well, if we’re being honest, I was starting to think you were regretting everything that’s happened between us,” she admitted, looking down at their fingers, which were tightly interlaced.

“I was starting to think that perhaps you were wishing we’d never gone through with the wedding,” she clarified.

“That’s not true, I promise you,” he said quickly, shuffling on the step so that he was facing her properly.

“I haven’t regretted it for a moment, and I’m sorry if I’ve made you feel that way.”

She glanced up at him through her lashes and saw the pained expression on his face.

It was true, she realized. He really did seem to regret that he’d allowed her to think he didn’t want her in Colorado.

“I’ve always wanted a wife,” Daniel said after a few moments of silence.

“I always wanted to meet a woman I felt I would be able to share my life with, a woman I could love and who would love me in turn. I wanted a family. But... I never pursued it.”

“You... didn’t?” Lilly echoed, thinking at first that she might have misheard him. Surely she hadn’t heard him correctly, given what



Missy had said earlier that day.

“There was no woman you ever asked to marry before?” she pressed.

“No,” he admitted with a wry smile. “There was no one.

“I think I was always too scared that I would say or do something so wrong that it would scare her away, and she would leave me.

“The thought of that, of pushing someone away... that just terrified me so much. It always has done.”

*Perhaps I misheard Missy*, Lilly thought, frowning down at her hand, which was still laced tightly with Daniel’s. His story didn’t match up with the one she had been told earlier that day at all, so something wasn’t right.

But there was no way she could have misheard the other woman—she’d definitely told Lilly that *Daniel* had proposed to her, only a few months before he’d begun writing to Lilly, herself.

*So, is Daniel lying to me?* she wondered. Perhaps he was too ashamed to admit that he had been scorned to tell her the truth.

Maybe he worried she would think less of him if she found out he had been rejected before.

And Jill *had* mentioned that his heart had been broken by another woman before they had met, she knew that now. So what was the truth?

She wanted to ask him about Missy so badly—no one had yet told her the whole story of their relationship, and Jill was so adamant

that the truth would have to come from him, not from her.

As she had said so clearly, it wasn't *her* story to tell. But the last time Lilly had tried to bring this topic up to him, he had pushed her away.

How were they supposed to have this conversation if Daniel was so resistant to it?

Lilly pulled her lower lip between her teeth for a moment, thinking about how to bring up the topic again. She didn't want to accuse him of lying to her outright, especially as she didn't *know* he was lying.

"I don't want much, you know that. I don't care about money, or gifts, or appearances, either. The only thing I want from you is for you to be honest with me, always."

Daniel swallowed hard at that, and nodded slowly. "I understand."

"I know this marriage is still young." She paused, smiling gently. "It's *very* young."

"And I know you might not trust me enough to tell me everything about your past, especially the parts that might be painful. But I do hope that... eventually, you might find yourself comfortable enough with me to do that?"

Daniel breathed out a heavy sigh and shared her smile, just briefly. It wavered quickly, though, and then slipped from his features.

"You're willing to wait? I know you must be frustrated—since you've arrived, you've had so many questions, and I haven't answered them."

She had to admit, it was comforting to hear that Daniel understood why she was starting to grow so restless. It felt good to just *talk* to him about all of this, rather than dancing around the topic anxiously without getting any answers.

Of course, she was no closer to finding out the exact details of his past, but it no longer felt completely impossible that she ever would find out.

“It would be unfair of me to force you to talk about something you aren’t ready to relive,” Lilly whispered.

She knew, from her own painful experiences, it could be difficult to talk about certain topics.

For her, it was physically impossible to talk about what had happened to her parents in any detail: her throat would seal shut, her heart would pound, and her breath would stop in her lungs.

It was as if her body was trying desperately to stop her from uttering a single word about what had happened that day.

If Daniel really was still wounded by something that had happened between himself and Missy, then Lilly was going to need to be gentle with him.

“I know how difficult it can be to talk about the things that have hurt us in the past,” she assured him.

“Sometimes... it almost feels as painful as when it happened. I don’t ever want to cause you that kind of pain.”

Daniel’s smile widened at that, and he shifted a little closer to her on the front step of the porch. “Thank you.

“I was worried if I ever got up the courage to tell you about all of this, it would end badly. I don’t know why I was so sure of that, but...”

He trailed off and laughed, looking down at his feet for a second, drawing in another deep breath, like he was steeling himself.

When he turned his head to look back at her again, he almost seemed bashful. “I suppose I just have a tendency to overthink things, and I worry too much.”

“My mother always said we only ever worry about the things we really care about. The more you care, the more you worry,” Lily said quietly, taking a second to look down at their hands, still tightly clasped.

For the first time, she noticed just how well they fit together—her fingers were long and slender, and slipped easily into the gaps between his. His hand was so much larger that it almost completely encompassed hers, like a protective shield.

It was nice to feel the warmth of his palm against her own, to feel the tip of his thumb graze against her knuckles lightly.

*Perhaps that’s why I’m so worried about Missy, she thought to herself, still staring down at their hands. Perhaps I’m so frustrated by her because I care about Daniel.*

It was a funny thought to have—after all, the two hardly knew each other, and he and Missy had a history that stretched back for years. Despite that, though, when Lilly glanced up from their hands to look at him again, it didn’t seem all that crazy to her.

In those few moments of peace, with the quickly fading sunlight

casting a weak golden glow over them both, she truly felt as though the life she'd always dreamed of was within reach again, with Daniel by her side.

Still smiling to herself, Lilly moved a little closer to Daniel on the front step, until they were sat with their knees touching. Then, she rested her head gently on his shoulder, staring out into the sky as the last few rays of sunlight faded.

Daniel's shoulders tensed a little as she made contact, but then slowly, Lilly felt him relax into her touch. *If every day feels like this, I'll be happy*, she told herself.

This would be the perfect way to end each day out in Colorado: basking in the late evening glow, listening to the distant chirping of insects in the fields, with a gentle breeze cooling her skin.

It was a world away from the evenings she'd had in New York. Most nights were spent trying to get to sleep while she listened to the sound of drunken fights outside, hardly muffled by her thin walls.

If she wasn't trying to get some rest, she would be hard at work, hunched up over an oil candle with a needle in one hand and a blouse in the other, peering at the hem work through bleary eyes.

However she had found herself on most evenings in the city, it certainly wasn't peaceful.

But this? This was the most relaxed she'd felt in a long time.

As she sat there on the porch, watching the sky above melt into a soft, hazy shade of blue, the hue that would only appear so very briefly in that period between sunset and total darkness, Lilly felt

as though she would never want to get up again.

*I could stay here forever.*

**I**t was strange to feel Lilly's head on his shoulder, to feel her knee pressing against his.

The feeling of someone he didn't consider to be family touching him was such a bizarre concept that Daniel felt himself go rigid on instinct, freezing up like an animal being hunted.

*What do I do now?* he wondered to himself.

Was he supposed to lean into her touch, was he supposed to wrap an arm around her shoulder and pull her closer? No, that felt like it would be awkward and uncomfortable for them both.

He could nudge his foot against hers, but that might look like he was kicking her away, and that was the last thing he wanted her to think.

He was overthinking, he realized, and the more he thought about what to do next, the tenser he became. So, after taking a deep breath in and slowly letting it out, Daniel allowed himself to relax a little.

*You don't need to think so much all the damn time,* he reminded

himself sternly. *Sometimes it's alright to just sit with another person, like now.*

*It's enough to just be here, together. You don't need to worry about doing anything else.*

It was difficult not to overthink—a lifetime of being largely alone had given him nothing but time to let his own thoughts consume him—but as he sat there with Lilly, Daniel didn't let himself think about anything at all.

He didn't worry about what to say or do next, he didn't let himself stress about whether he was doing enough, or if she was comfortable. He just sat there, listening to the steady breathing of his wife beside him, enjoying the weight of her head on his shoulder.

"I've never seen a sky look like this." Lilly whispered. "All these colors, stretching out endlessly. The world looks so big from here."

Daniel had to admit, he'd never thought about how large the world seemed before. This was the only sky he'd ever known, the only horizon he'd ever gazed at.

"It looks smaller in the city?"

"Yes." Lilly lifted her head up as she spoke. "Everything is quite cramped in the city."

"There isn't a lot of space to build out far, so they just keep building *up* instead. The buildings stretch up so high it feels like they'll block out the sun one day."

Daniel had never heard someone speak about a place like this.



On the one hand, Lilly almost sounded wistful, as though she'd give anything to be back there, but on the other... she seemed glad to put the place behind her.

"Do you miss it?"

"I don't know," she admitted, letting out a soft laugh. "I have a lot of fond memories from my childhood in that city.

"I can remember running through the snow with my mother, riding on my father's shoulders so I could see above crowds..."

That wistful, longing tone had taken over completely now, and Daniel realized why she seemed so conflicted. The city was where she had come from, it was where her story had started.

All of her memories of her parents were there, and they were happy ones, but that happiness was marred by the life she'd had to lead once they'd died.

Lilly paused, and when she spoke again her voice was lower, as though she was struggling with her words a little.

"I don't know if I miss the city, to be honest. I just know that I miss *them*, and I suppose in my mind, the two are always going to be linked."

"Do you... regret leaving?"

"No." Her answer came so quickly that it took Daniel by surprise.

Lilly turned to look at him properly, and smiled. In an instant, all of the desperate longing and pain he'd picked out of her face and voice was gone, and all that was left was that warm, enchanting

smile.

“I don’t regret it.”

“You’re sure?” He couldn’t help but feel a little guilty for being the reason she now found herself so far away from her memories with her parents.

“I’m glad that I came here, Daniel,” she promised him. “I can’t say that it’s been entirely easy, but... but I’m glad I made the choice.”

*It hasn’t been easy, he repeated to himself, wincing at the words. Of course it hasn’t been an easy transition for her.*

*She’s thousands of miles away from the only life she’s ever known, and I haven’t made it any easier on her. I’ve been so distant and difficult...*

Daniel shook himself mentally and forced himself to stop.

He hadn’t come out here with Lilly so that he could spiral into those same thoughts of self-doubt that he always ended up in—he’d come out here with her so they could spend time together, enjoy each other’s company a little.

“I’m glad you came out here, too,” he assured her with a smile. “I don’t think I’ve told you that enough yet, have I?”

Lilly paused before answering him. She probably didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but Daniel knew from her expression alone that he was right.

“This is all still very new for us both,” she said finally, landing on a rather diplomatic answer.

“I think it’s going to take a little while for us to get more comfortable in each other’s company, and then I think it might get a little easier. I never thought that all of this was going to be easy, though, so it’s okay.”

“I’m sorry if I’ve made this more difficult for you,” Daniel sighed. “Being the way I am. I don’t ever want you to feel like I don’t want you to be here, because I do.”

“I’m so glad that I wrote to you, Lilly.”

“You are?” Her voice was a little hesitant, like she didn’t really believe him. Daniel felt another wave of guilt wash over him as he realized her trepidation.

Since she’d arrived in town, he really hadn’t helped her to feel like she was wanted or welcome.

“Of course.” He moved a little closer to her, so his side was flush with hers, and reached down to take her other hand as well.

“I remember looking at the advertisement for the first time and thinking I was never going to be able to make a decision about who I would like to get to know.

“Then I read yours, and I read it again and again... I kept coming back to it, and I knew I wanted to write to you. It was the best choice I’ve ever made.”

The confession came out as a rambling, breathless mess, and when he fell quiet, Daniel very much doubted that his new wife had actually managed to understand any of what he had said.

It was the first time he’d spoken so earnestly about his feelings to

her, and he wanted to make sure she knew how he felt, so he spoke again, more slowly this time.

“My whole life, I wanted a family of my own. I never knew how to even begin looking for one, and I had this vague idea of what I wanted from a marriage.

“But then, when I began writing to you, I realized exactly what I was looking for. I wanted a woman who was kind, a woman who was patient—patient enough to put up with me, at least. I found that when I began writing to you.”

Lilly’s mouth fell open in surprise at his honesty, and she blinked rapidly, unable to come up with a response besides a soft, “Oh.”

“I may not be a man who’s good with his words,” Daniel admitted, smiling wryly. “I don’t pretend to be able to express myself well. I... Talking like this, about the way I feel...

“It doesn’t come naturally to me, I’m afraid. But I don’t want that to ever make you feel as though you aren’t wanted here, because you are.

“I’m so glad that you came here, I’m so glad you’re my wife,” he told her.

A warm smile broke out across Lilly’s features at that, and she let out a gentle laugh, shaking her head in disbelief. “I... I’m glad to be your wife, Daniel.”

“I want to try harder to make sure you know that.” He looked down at their hands for a moment, before smiling at her again.

“I may struggle at first, but I’ll get better, I promise. You’re

everything I ever hoped for in a wife, and you deserve to hear that.”

Lilly slowly slipped one hand out of his, and reached up to touch his cheek. The pads of her fingers were warm as they tapped against his skin before sliding into his hair.

The palm of her hand cupped his cheek and Daniel leaned into it instinctively, smiling. He hadn’t expected to feel so comfortable beside her yet, but here they both were.

It just felt so... right.

Even the silence between them didn’t feel like the ones that had come before it. Daniel didn’t feel the same prickly, uncomfortable tension that he had done during the silences that had fallen between them in the past.

He didn’t feel the pressure to fill the space by talking about something—he was happy to just *be*. And then, as he gazed into Lilly’s eyes, a shade of green so light they almost looked blue, he began to lean in.

It was like she was drawing him closer, pulling him in without saying a word. Just looking into her eyes was enough to make Daniel move closer.

He stopped just short of closing the gap between them completely, though, holding himself back with his face so close to hers that the tips of their noses *almost* brushed together.

The world around them seemed to freeze. On an evening like this, he should have been able to hear the wind rustling through the trees that lined the house, pushing the long grass around.

He should have been able to hear the faint chirping and whirring of insects around them, or maybe the very distant chatter of fellow ranch hands. But there on the porch, in that moment, Daniel was aware of none of that.

There was only Lilly.

He was so close that he could have counted the freckles that dusted the bridge of her nose and the apples of her cheeks if he'd wanted to, turning away from the vibrant sunset just to look at her instead.

He didn't, though. There was something else he wanted.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked quietly, his voice only a whisper. He heard a sharp intake of breath, and then Lilly's voice.

"Yes."

He hadn't kissed her yet, not properly. The kiss to seal their marriage at the church in town had felt more like a contractual obligation, like a handshake at the end of a business meeting.

It was cold and almost unnatural, and Daniel had felt uncomfortable as he'd done it. It felt unfair to even call it a kiss.

But as Daniel leaned in this time, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. He captured her lips in a tender kiss, cradling her in his arms as he did.

In the still of the cool evening air, it was the perfect first kiss for their marriage.

Lilly's lips were soft against his, and as Daniel pulled her closer to him, he felt the warmth of her body against his chest.

She returned the kiss eagerly, bringing both hands up to cup either side of his face, and just before he pulled away from her, Daniel could have sworn he felt her smile.

When he did finally break away, he didn't move far, pressing his forehead against hers as he let out a nervous chuckle. "So, that's what it feels like."

Lilly pulled back a little further, and giggled. "You're blushing."

"No I'm not," Daniel mumbled, trying to hide his face. It was no use, though, Lilly's hands were still cupping both cheeks and he knew she could feel as they grew hotter.

"You are!" she teased, laughing properly. "You're blushing!"

"I'm just—it's a warm night!" he protested weakly, but even he knew he didn't sound convincing, and soon they were both laughing together.

Lilly jostled his shoulder gently before laying her head on it again, and they fell into a comfortable silence for another few moments.

Finally, she broke it by speaking up. She sounded a little nervous, hesitant about broaching whatever the subject was with him, and lifted her head up so that she could look at him properly.

"Can I ask you something?"

The breath hitched in Daniel's throat at that. A question, of course. "What do you want to know?"

"You've always spoken about Abel as if he was your father..." Lilly paused for a moment, cocking an eyebrow. "But you don't share

the same last name as him. Why is that?”

There it was. Daniel felt an all too familiar prickling sensation come over him, and for a moment, his head was filled with the taunts of his youth—boys calling him the poor little orphan, mimicking the high-pitched wails of a baby.

He blinked, shifting on the spot uncomfortably as he cleared his head, and then he spoke up again. “Abel is my father. He’s the only father I’ve ever known.

“He... he may not be my father by blood, but he put a roof over my head, taught me everything I know, and gave me everything but his last name. I don’t know why he never changed it to be the same as his.”

Lilly nodded slowly, taking the information in.

Daniel could almost see her filing away the new fact against everything she had already learned of him, and he could tell she probably had more questions—it would only be natural, after all—but they never came.

She didn’t ask after his mother, she didn’t ask *why* a stranger had decided to raise him.

*She isn’t going to push me*, he realized with a start. *She isn’t going to push me to tell her anything more until I’m ready.*

While he was grateful to her for sticking to her word, Daniel couldn’t help but feel a little anxious as they sat there together in silence, now watching as the first stars glimmered in the darkness above.



She'd told him she was willing to wait until he was ready to talk about his past, but how long would that patience last? Would she get tired of his hesitation before he had the courage to tell her about everything?

*That would be a sick twist of fate, wouldn't it?* he thought bitterly. *If my fear of pushing my wife away is what forces her to pull away from me herself.*

He could only hope that wouldn't be the case.

When Lilly woke up the next morning, it was with a smile.

When she rolled over in bed and saw her husband still sleeping peacefully beside her, the smile only widened, and when he stumbled into the kitchen still bleary-eyed for breakfast, she stifled a giggle.

She was *happy*. For the first time since she had arrived in Colorado, she felt truly happy.

Daniel noticed it, too. When she poured his morning coffee with that same smile on her lips, he spotted it straight away. “You’re in a good mood.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” She pointed out the window, out toward the ranch. “It’s a beautiful day out there, isn’t it?”

It *was* a beautiful day. Though it was early, the sun was already shining high in the sky above them, without a cloud in sight.

But that wasn’t the reason for her good mood, not really.

The truth was, the night before had been the first time she'd really felt like she had connected with Daniel, and even though she'd learned very little about his past, the whole thing didn't feel quite so futile anymore.

*Little by little, she realized, I can chip away at that hardened exterior, and I can learn a little more about him. At some point, I suppose I'll find out who he really is.*

It was hard to be in anything *other* than a good mood after their conversation.

Even the thought of Missy and her condescending sneer couldn't dampen Lilly's spirits as she cleared the table after breakfast, humming to herself as she set about cleaning up the dishes.

*Whatever happened between Daniel and Missy is in the past, she told herself when Daniel kissed her on the cheek and headed into the fields for work. She watched him go through the window before returning to her own chores, still smiling to herself.*

*Missy is the past, but that doesn't mean she has to have any impact on the present—or the future, for that matter. Perhaps if Daniel is ready to move on from her, then his future will include me. Just me, not the ghost of her.*

She had never been jealous or protective over a man before—of course, she had never been close enough to a man to warrant such emotions until she had met Daniel, but when she thought about Missy, that jealousy flickered in her belly.

She still didn't know everything that had happened between the two of them, but she decided she didn't need to; she knew enough.

Missy had hurt him, but he didn't have to carry that pain with him for the rest of his life. Perhaps, over time, she would be able to help him heal from it.

The first main obstacle to overcoming all of this, of course, would be for Daniel to tell her the truth about everything that had happened, but it seemed as though they were making good progress in that regard.

He'd opened up to her the night before—he hadn't told her much, but he'd at least shown that he was willing to talk about his past. And for the time being, Lilly thought, that was good enough for her.

Daniel wasn't the only one to notice her good mood. Jill commented on it later that day as the two worked side by side, cleaning the main house.

They were scrubbing the floors of the main house together, working on the kitchen when Jill spoke up.

"I don't think I've ever seen someone smile so much while cleaning the floor," she said pointedly. "Is everything alright?"

"Everything's just fine, Jill," Lilly assured her. "Couldn't be better."

"You're smiling a lot." Jill narrowed her eyes. "You haven't gotten into Abel's whiskey cabinet, have you?"

"I'm just happy! Aren't I allowed to be happy?"

"Not while you're scrubbing the floor, you're not."

Lilly only giggled at that before dunking her scrubbing brush back

into the bucket of hot soapy water beside her.

The smell of cleaning solution was overpowering, and she knew when she made her way home that evening her hands would be dry and positively stink of the stuff, but she didn't care.

She didn't care that her knees were bruised from the solid wooden floor beneath her, or that her arms ached from cleaning. She didn't care about any of it.

How could she, when she'd be going home to Daniel? She'd cook dinner, they'd talk a little more and watch as the sun set around them, and perhaps they'd stare up at the stars together for a little while.

She didn't really mind what they did, as long as they did it together. As long as they kept moving forward, nothing else mattered.

That weekend, when Lilly woke up, she was surprised to find Daniel already out of bed. When she walked into the kitchen she spotted him through the window, on the porch.

He was leaning against the railing, staring out over the ranch with his hat tilted down low to shield his eyes from the rising sun.

In the time she'd spent getting to know her new husband, Lilly had come to realize that he wasn't a particularly relaxed man.

He seemed constantly unsure of himself, like he was second-guessing every decision he made, worrying about even the smallest of things. It must have been exhausting, so it was nice to watch

him be at peace, even if only for a short time.

Lilly slipped out onto the porch to join him, and at the sound of the wooden boards creaking under her weight, Daniel turned to look at her, smiling. “Good morning.”

“Good morning.” Lilly joined him by the railing, mirroring his movements as she leaned against the wood.

She looked out over the property for a few moments, taking in the sight of the ranch in the cool, early morning light.

Before the ranch hands headed out to work the fields, and the energy of the day started to flow through the place, there was a quiet serenity about it that was really quite beautiful.

“I was thinking,” Daniel cleared his throat, “do you have plans today?”

“Plans? No. Why?”

He grinned and glanced back toward the house. “We never did pick up those rolls of fabric for you, did we?”

She agreed that no, they hadn’t managed to do that, and Daniel decided it was time they returned. This time, he promised her, they would come back to the house with armfuls of whatever fabrics she desired.

Their second trip into town was much more successful than the first. When they stepped into the fabric store, Lilly held her breath for a brief moment as she couldn’t help but think about their last ill-fated venture inside, but everything went smoothly.

“Pick out whatever you want,” Daniel reminded her as he ushered her inside the building.

“Whatever fabrics, anything you want from the catalog on the counter. I’m putting it all in your hands; I won’t interfere.”

“You’re allowed to have some input,” she insisted, nudging his shoulder gently. “After all, it *is* your house.”

“We’ve been through this already. I’ve got no idea what I’m doing in a place like this.” Daniel gestured around at the fabric supplies and scraps that surrounded them.

To Lilly, this place was heaven—she could have gladly spent the whole day picking her way through samples and discarded cuts of cloth, but it was clear the whole thing was a little intimidating for Daniel.

“I can build a house, I can fix up a fence, but when it comes to colors and prints and fabrics... It’s like someone’s speaking a foreign language to me, to be honest.”

She giggled at that, and linked her arm with his. “Well, you have to have an opinion on it. I won’t bring anything into the house that you don’t approve of first.”

“You don’t have to—” Daniel began to protest, but Lilly shushed him and tugged him along, deeper into the store.

“You said last time that we’re here to decorate *our* house, didn’t you?”

The tips of his ears turned pink at the memory, and he nodded. “Yes.”

“For it to be *our* home then *we* need to decorate it together, don’t you think?” Lilly smiled up at him encouragingly.

The last time they’d stepped into the store, she had admittedly been the one to make the majority of the choices for the decorations in their house, and Daniel had simply trailed behind her, helping her to carry rolls of fabric when her arms got too full.

This time, though, she wanted the decision to be a joint one.

“What do you think about light curtains for our bedroom?” she asked, pulling him toward a roll of cream fabric she had seen during their last outing together.

Daniel peered at it, and then at a similar roll behind it. Lilly watched his eyes move back and forth quickly, like he was trying to tell the difference between the two.

A line appeared between his brows, and then he pulled back, shaking his head.

“I don’t... I don’t know,” he said finally, letting out a faint sigh. “What curtains did you have in your home in New York?”

“I...” She felt heat rise to her cheeks at the thought of the shabby, dark apartment she had left behind.

Even while she had been living there, the place had seemed so depressing, but now that she had been able to experience life in Montana, she couldn’t help but wonder how she had ever been able to put up with living like that for so long.

“I didn’t have any curtains,” she admitted. “I didn’t have the money for fabric.”



“Oh.” Daniel looked a little uncomfortable, and after a few beats of heavy silence passed between the two of them, he cleared his throat. “Well, I like this one.”

He reached out to touch the roll of fabric Lilly had been pointing at, then smiled encouragingly at her. “If you want to make curtains in our room with this, I’d like that a lot.”

“You would? I was hoping they’d be thin enough that a little of the light could shine through in the mornings, just to brighten the room and warm it up a little.”

“That sounds like a fantastic idea,” he assured her, his smile widening. “I love it, let’s buy some.”

He picked up the roll and tucked it under his arm before nudging her on so they could continue weaving their way through the store.

From then on, he seemed to make more of an effort to take an interest in the fabrics or patterns Lilly chose, and she noticed he asked more questions.

He wanted to know why she chose one pattern over another, why she didn’t feel two particular colours would look good in the same room, or with a certain type of wooden furniture.

He asked about her start as a seamstress, the kind of work she used to do back in the city, and he listened to her answers.

Needlework and mending clothes couldn’t have been something he was particularly interested in, but as she spoke, Lilly never once got the impression that he was bored by her.

Lilly explained her process to begin making the tablecloth and

drapes for the rooms, about how she would measure out the fabric against the window frames or the kitchen table, how she would cut and fold the edges to make sure they were neat.

Daniel listened patiently to the whole thing, never once asking her to stop or change the subject. It was nice to just feel like she was being listened to—it made her feel appreciated.

With their arms full of fabric and orders placed for some new furniture, Lilly and Daniel decided it was time to make their way back to the ranch, and on the return trip, Daniel decided to give her a little more of an insight into the town.

“At some point, I’ll need to take you out on a real tour,” he said as they set off. “There’s a lot of really interesting places that you can find out on the edge of town and beyond.

“Some of it’s quite strange, because you’ll find a lot of abandoned buildings out to the west, and some old encampments, too.”

“Why are they abandoned?” Lilly asked, looking around as they passed through the town. “It doesn’t look like this place is that old at all.”

“Well, that depends on your definition of *old*,” he admitted. “But I suppose it’s not that old.

“The problem is, when the town was first settled—by Abel’s older brother, among other folks—it was supposed to be a gold mining town.”

“Gold mining?” she breathed out, feeling her eyes widen.

She’d heard a lot of stories about gold mining towns popping up all

over the West, but she'd always thought they were further out, in places like California.

"Don't get too excited," he chuckled. "According to Abel, his brother and a few others came out West to found the town around this gold mine, thinking they were going to be rich for generations.

"His brother wrote him so many letters telling him how the mine was going to be a huge success. Then, of course, a few years after Abel arrived in town, the gold mine dried up."

"That fast?"

"Turns out it was a small deposit of gold, not nearly enough to sustain a town. That, coupled with the fact that the well out to the west dried up... it just didn't make sense to have folks living out that far.

"They found another good spot a little further east, with a good enough water table for ranches, and that's where the town was really able to blossom.

"Of course, all of this happened a long time before either of us were born, but you can still see the ghosts of it around the outskirts of town.

"There's an old jail, the old well, and I think an old prospector's shack. At least, there used to be. I used to play in it when I was a boy."

"It sounds like you know a lot about the town," she said with a smile. "What happened to Abel's brother?"

"Thomas? Oh, he didn't last long out here. Abel set up the ranch,

and he began doing quite well for himself, even moved their parents out to the house.

“But Thomas came to get rich on gold, and he couldn’t stomach the idea of being a rancher. He got married and ended up leaving, heading for the city.

“I think he got involved in gambling, but by the sounds of things he was quite good at it. Abel doesn’t talk about him a whole lot, so I think once he left town they fell out of touch.”

“That’s a shame.”

Daniel shrugged. “The way he told it, his brother was a bit of a glory seeker, wasn’t much for hard work. They weren’t well suited to working together, from what I recall.

“Abel was happy with the life he made here, though. He even managed to start a family, although it was quite a strange one.”

“What makes you say that?”

A strange look came over Daniel as he gazed ahead, and Lilly saw his eyes widen momentarily. It was almost as if he’d said something he wasn’t supposed to.

Then, he coughed loudly, cleared his throat, and rubbed the back of his neck. “I... Well... He took Jill in when she was a teen.”

“He did?”

“Yes. She’s his niece.” Daniel’s gaze flickered to her for a moment, before he looked away just as quickly. “Thomas’s daughter.”

“Oh!” No one had mentioned that to her before, and although she’d suspected Daniel and Jill weren’t blood siblings, no one had provided her with any proof. “Really?”

“Yes. Abel, uh, he took her in when she was a teen. Her parents died in a fire, and in Thomas’s will, he said he wanted Abel to take her in if he ever passed.”

“So I suppose, even if they weren’t that close after he left town, Thomas trusted him enough to leave his only daughter with him.” Lilly thought about it for a moment, frowning.

“Do you think Abel would have done the same for you? Would he have trusted Thomas to raise *you*?”

She knew she was pushing close to the boundaries of what Daniel seemed to be comfortable with.

He was happy to talk about his childhood in vague terms—what it was like to grow up exploring the town, growing up on a ranch surrounded by animals, learning the ropes of how to run a successful business like Abel did—but he didn’t like specifics.

The real details of his past, those were still uncomfortably raw for him, and now she was tentatively pressing him on just those aspects of his life. She waited with bated breath while Daniel’s brows pulled together in a frown, and he let out a sigh.

“I don’t know,” he answered softly. “I suppose I’ve never really given much thought to anyone but Abel raising me.

“He’s the only father I’ve known, and the only father I would ever *want* to know, as well. It doesn’t do me much good to think about what *might* have been, does it?”

It was a cryptic answer, managing to both answer her question and not answer it at all in the same breath.

One thing was clear, though—as strained as Daniel’s relationship with his own past was, he truly loved and admired the man who had raised him. He loved his *family*.

Lilly only hoped that in time, he would be able to think of her as a part of that family, too.

How long would that take? How much longer would she have to keep pushing him until he saw her that way?

Daniel had been a married man for five weeks and three days when the first letter arrived. He'd been counting the days, although if anyone had asked him, he would have denied it.

He was enjoying being married. Each day, he was learning a little more about Lilly, and he found himself relaxing into her company more and more.

Every morning they said goodbye at the porch steps, and Daniel would press a gentle kiss to her lips before heading off to work.

They'd share a wave, and he'd give her one last glance over his shoulder one last time before he made his way to the fields for a long day of work.

At first, it didn't feel all that bad to be apart from each other all day, but as the weeks wore on, it began to grate on Daniel, and he found himself growing more and more anxious to return home to her.

Every evening on his way back from the fields, he would look up to their small house and see her waiting on the porch for him.

The first few times he'd seen her out there, she'd had a broom in one hand, and quickly got to work sweeping the porch when she realized he had spotted her.

Then, she stopped bothering to sweep as he approached the house, and after a couple of weeks, she didn't even bring the broom out with her while she waited for him to come home.

Lilly had actually admitted to him one evening that she'd only brought the broom out on the first day because she didn't want to seem like she'd just been waiting around for him to come home to her all day.

When she'd seen him coming, though, she'd realized there was nothing to sweep up.

She had seemed a little embarrassed by the confession, but he'd thought it was sweet, and he assured her she'd never have to find a reason to wait for him. He would always be glad to see her on the front porch when he made his way home.

As time went by and things between them grew a little more comfortable, Daniel almost managed to forget all about his initial nerves about married life.

It didn't seem like Lilly was in any hurry to leave for New York again, nor did she have any real desire to press him for more information on his mother. They were just both happy to spend time together, each relaxing in the other's company.

And then, of course, just as he got comfortable, the letter came.

It was almost like an all-knowing force had been watching him, had seen him grow complacent with his new life. To punish him,



the letter served as a reminder of why he had been so nervous about marriage in the first place.

When the letter had arrived, Daniel had been working by the stables with Andrew, repairing some of the older boards that were all but falling out.

The two men were chatting idly as they worked side by side, until they were interrupted by another of the ranch hands—a scrawny young boy Abel had hired a few weeks earlier.

“Letter for you, mister.” The boy shoved the envelope into Daniel’s hands as he passed the stables. “The boss told me to give it to you.”

With that he wandered off, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his trousers.

Andrew watched the boy, shaking his head with a low sigh. “One of these days, that kid’s going to fall on his face.”

“Hm?” Daniel murmured, peering at the envelope. He didn’t recognize the handwriting, and when he flipped it over, there was no return address.

It wasn’t often that he received mail that didn’t concern the ranch, and those letters usually came from the bank, or other ranchers in the area.

This didn’t look like one of those letters.

“He’s always skulking around with his hands in his pockets. One day he’s going to trip and fall, and when his hands are in his pockets, he won’t be able to stop himself.”

Andrew clicked his tongue, shaking his head again. "I don't like his attitude."

"I didn't like yours when Abel hired you," Daniel pointed out, flipping the envelope over again to look at the front.

Now that he examined it again, there was something familiar about the cursive scribble and he was sure he had seen it somewhere before, but he couldn't place where.

"What was wrong with me?" Andrew sounded genuinely offended by that, and for a moment, he drew Daniel's attention from the letter.

He looked up at the other man and flashed him a quick smile.

"Harriet didn't trust you when you first came here," he reminded his friend. "And she's got a good sense for people."

"You didn't like me because of a *mare*?"

"Because of a smart mare." Daniel frowned and tore the envelope open.

There was no sense in trying to figure out who had sent the letter from the envelope alone when they'd more than likely signed their name.

"Shush, I'm reading."

"Who's it from?"

Daniel hardly heard his friend's voice. The moment he opened the letter and read the opening words, he knew who had written the

letter, though it seemed impossible.

*My dearest son.*

That was how the letter was addressed, to a ‘dearest son,’ which Daniel had never been in his life.

Of course, Abel called him ‘son,’ and saw him as such, but the old man never would have called him ‘dearest.’ No, that sounded much more like what a—

*No*, Daniel scolded himself, looking away from the letter before he could read any further. *Stop it. There’s no possible way she could have written to you.*

“Daniel?”

He heard Andrew’s voice again, but this time his friend sounded as though he was farther away, more distant now. It was like there was a thick wall separating the two of them.

“Are you alright?”

With trembling hands, Daniel brought the letter closer to his face so he could continue to read, but for a few moments he couldn’t get past the first words.

*My dearest son.* That was all he could see, over and over again.

They were the words he had wanted to hear for his whole life, words he had craved the way some longed for a hot meal.

Those were the words of a mother.

But were they the words of *his* mother? Could it really be possible, more than twenty years after she had left him on Abel's doorstep, that his mother wanted to reach out to him?

*My dearest son,*

*I can only apologize for all the years I have been gone. By now I know you must have grown into a fine man, and while I have few regrets in this life, it does pain me to know I was never able to see you become the man I knew you were always destined to be.*

*I know you will be handsome, just as your father was. I hope you are just as kind and generous as he was, too, but given the company I left you with, I have no doubts of that.*

*I would not blame you if you hate me for what I did all those years ago. There are few on this earth who would be able to understand how difficult it was to make the decision to leave you in the care of a stranger, even fewer who would be able to do it themselves.*

*The day I said goodbye to you, my darling boy, was the worst day of my life, and it was the most difficult decision I ever had to make.*

*Although it was a nearly impossible choice to leave you where I did, I knew it would be the only chance I would have to give you the life you deserved.*

*It was a life I would not be able to provide for you, given how I was penniless and alone, but I hoped and prayed the man I left you with would be able to give to you what I could not.*

*If this letter finds you in good health, then I suppose it means I made the right decision.*

*After all this time apart, I would not expect for you to think of me as your mother if we were to pass each other in a room. But even though I knew you only a short time, I have thought of you as my son each and every day, and I always will.*

*Eternally yours,*

*Your adoring mother.*

Daniel didn't even realize he was crying until he'd finished the letter, and he heard someone calling his name again. This time, the voice was louder, and it pulled him back to the real world, where he was sat on the dirt outside the stable.

In one hand he clutched the letter, in the other the envelope, and his cheeks were wet.

Through his tears he saw Abel's hazy figure, looming in close. At some point, Andrew must have run to get the older man, but Daniel couldn't even remember hearing him leave.

He didn't even know how long he had been there on the ground, reading the letter and crying to himself.

"What's wrong, son?" Abel asked, squeezing Daniel's shoulders tightly. "What happened?"

Daniel didn't have the words to tell him. All he could do was to thrust the letter into Abel's hands and wait with bated breath as the older man read it.

His mind raced as Abel dropped to sit in the dirt beside him. Was the letter really from his mother?

Why, after all these years, would she want to get into contact with him again? What was she like? Was she married now, did she have children?

Was there a whole family out there that he had never even known about? Did *they* know about *him*?

The thoughts all came to him at once in a sudden barrage, hitting him with such force that he felt physically sick, uncertain of what to worry about first.

As he watched Abel read the letter, though, one thought came to him clearer than the rest, standing apart from his other concerns.

*Lilly.*

He still hadn't told Lilly anything about his mother.

He'd hoped she would never ask, or would at least wait for a long, *long* time before broaching the subject with him. Now it seemed as though his hand had been forced.

*I'm not ready to tell her about all of this*, he thought to himself, shaking his head slowly as his mind reeled. *I'm not ready to talk about my mother.*

*I'm not ready to talk about why I was so afraid of marriage. I'm not ready, I'm not ready, I'm not—*

"This is the letter that came this morning?" Abel's gentle voice pulled Daniel from his quickly spiralling thoughts, and again he came back to reality.

Daniel blinked a few times, as though that would clear his head,

and then he nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Abel frowned down at the letter in his hands, cocking his head slowly from side to side as he looked at it, like he was trying to evaluate it. “After all this time...”

Daniel rested his head in his hands, breathing out a shaky sigh. He still hadn’t told Lilly about any of this, but now he had to.

It would be better for her to hear about all of this from him, and not from someone else—or worse still, from his mother herself, if she decided to return to the ranch.

“Slow down there, son,” Abel said gently. “We don’t even know if this woman is who she’s claiming to be.”

Daniel looked up again sharply, and he realized with a start that he’d been speaking out loud. Heat rushed to his cheeks as he went red with embarrassment, and then he looked back down at the ground.

“What if it is her, though? Lilly doesn’t know about any of this.”

“You haven’t told her anything?” Abel cocked his head to one side. “Why not?”

“You know why.” Daniel frowned. “What kind of a woman would want a man whose own mother decided she would rather leave him with strangers than raise him herself?”

“Now, don’t you say something like that,” Abel chided. “If this letter is from your mother—if it is—then it sounds as though she had a mighty tough time leaving you with me.

“It was no easy decision for her to make. Don’t you go filling your head with those thoughts.”

Daniel shook his head silently, closing his eyes as he tried to steady his breathing. Abel didn’t understand, but he couldn’t blame the man.

If the roles were reversed, he likely wouldn’t be able to understand, either. It didn’t matter how difficult of a choice it had been to leave him on Abel’s doorstep, the only thing that *did* matter was that his mother had abandoned him.

Would his new wife decide it would be easier to do the same? Perhaps when she saw the letter and learned the truth he had been hiding for so long now, she would decide her life would be easier without him.

Before he could decide what to do, or even really process what was happening to him, Daniel heard a familiar voice in the distance, and he hurried to wipe his cheeks clean.

Off around the corner of the stables, just out of sight, he could hear Lilly talking to someone—probably to Jill.

He wasn’t ready to talk yet, but it didn’t seem he was going to have much of a choice in the matter. The two women rounded the corner before he could even pick himself up from the ground.

“Daniel?” He winced at the note of surprise in Lilly’s voice as she spotted him. “Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” he whispered, although it must have been obvious that it was a lie.



He was slumped in the dirt with bloodshot, bleary eyes, trembling. It was obvious he was the furthest thing from *fine*.

“Did you fall?” Lilly dropped to her knees beside him in an instant. “Did you hurt yourself? Should I fetch you something?”

“No, you can’t—I’m fine, really. I’m—” Whatever excuse Daniel was coming up with died on his lips before he could finish it.

He looked up, meeting Abel’s gaze, and saw how solemn the older man looked, his mouth pulled into a thin frown. He didn’t say anything, but he didn’t have to.

Daniel knew, from his expression alone, what the older man wanted to say to him.

It was time to come clean.

It was time he told Lilly everything. There was no way he could keep it a secret from her any longer, especially not if the letter was really from his mother.

After all, Lilly was his wife, and she deserved to know the truth.

“Lilly....” Daniel let out a long breath. “There’s something I think you ought to know.”

When she first saw Daniel on the ground, his face twisted into a grimace, Lilly thought he'd hurt himself.

Abel and Andrew crowded around him, and even as she and Jill rounded the corner from a distance, Lilly could see the men looked worried about him.

She was walking with Jill, but at the sight of her husband in the dirt, Lilly raced over to him, dropping down next to him. His chest was rising and falling heavily like he was struggling to catch his breath, and even up close he looked like he was in pain.

She couldn't see any marks or tears in his clothes, though, nothing that would indicate he was hurt. There was no blood, no bruising.

*What's wrong with him?*

"Daniel?" she whispered, taking his hand.

Once, as a young girl, she'd witnessed a cousin sleepwalking. At the time, she'd been terrified at the sight of the other girl wandering around in a trance-like state, as though she had been possessed by something.

Then, when she'd called her name loudly, the girl had jolted awake, back to reality. Lilly could still remember the way the girl had blinked in confusion, wearily asking why they were both out of bed.

She'd never forgotten the way the girl had jumped from her semi-conscious state into being fully awake in an instant, and Lilly saw that again now when she looked at Daniel.

He seemed a lot like her cousin had years earlier—like he was in a trance, caught between reality and a dream-like stupor. When she called his name, though, it seemed to pull him out of it, and bring him back to the real world.

He blinked once, twice, and then looked at her in confusion.

"Are you alright?" she asked quickly. "Are you hurt? Did you fall?"

"No," he tried to protest weakly. "I'm fine, I'm—"

He wasn't fine, though. Sweat beaded on his forehead, his skin had lost all its color, and he didn't seem to be able to even focus on her properly.

He was the furthest thing from fine.

"I'll be alright," he murmured again, still without conviction.

"Should I fetch you something?" she pressed. He shook his head again, a little more insistently.

"No, you can't—I'm fine, really. I'm—"

This time, though, as he tried to protest that everything was alright

and she should leave him be, he glanced up at Abel.

As he looked at the old man, he fell silent, and then let out a low sigh. "I..."

Something was wrong with him, but whatever it was, he seemed to want to keep it from her.

What could it possibly be that he would try to convince her everything was alright? What would he want to keep hidden?

*Missy.*

She felt her heart race as she waited for Daniel to speak. Finally, he looked back at her and pursed his lips. "Lilly, there's something you ought to know."

His expression was so grim that Lilly felt certain it had to be Missy.

There was only one thing that could be a barrier to their relationship, and it was his feelings for Missy, the woman who had scorned him and tossed him aside. The woman he had pined for, the woman he had wanted as his wife before meeting Lilly.

Tears sprang to her eyes, but she tried to push them back desperately, shaking her head. The last time she'd had these thoughts, the day they had met Missy in town, she had been so worried that their marriage was doomed to fail.

That was the night that Daniel had managed to soothe her worries, though, explaining his feelings for her in more detail than she'd ever thought he would be able to.

After they'd had that conversation on the porch, Lilly had begun to

feel much more secure about their relationship, but was it possible that everything was about to come crashing down around her again?

Just when things between the two of them had been going so well, how could Missy possibly rear her head to ruin things all over again?

The past few weeks had been so peaceful that Lilly had almost completely forgotten about the other woman; when they went into town they hardly saw her, and when they did, she didn't walk over to talk to them.

She hadn't come to the ranch since the night of their wedding, and Lilly no longer felt like she had to be on high alert for a sudden intrusion.

Perhaps she had been a little quick to let her guard down, though. Whatever was wrong with Daniel, whatever had upset him so, she was certain the other woman had something to do with it, even if she had no proof of that.

She could hear the others murmuring amongst themselves around her, but she didn't care what they had to say. In that moment, the only thing that really mattered to her was Daniel, and whether or not he was alright.

Finally, he spoke up. "It's... I got a letter."

*A letter?*

Lilly glanced down at his hands, and sure enough, clutched in his left hand so tightly it had almost been completely screwed up, there was a letter.

“Who from?” she asked, finally, when no one else seemed willing to pose the question.

Daniel pursed his lips into a thin line, as if finding the words to answer her was physically taxing, and then, just when she thought he was going to turn away without giving her an answer, he let out another breath and spoke.

“My mother. It’s from my mother.”

Behind her, Lilly heard Jill gasp audibly, but she remained just as confused as ever. The letter was from Daniel’s mother?

He hadn’t spoken about her at all—not in his letters to Lilly, nor after their marriage—and Lilly had just assumed the worst.

After all, there were countless poor women who died in childbirth, and it didn’t seem like a huge leap to imagine that his mother was one of them.

She had never assumed that his mother was still alive, or that she would ever send him a letter.

What was more strange, though, was that this news seemed to have come as a shock to the rest of the family. Jill, in particular, had gone pale, a hand clasped over her chest as if she could hardly believe her ears.

“I don’t understand,” Lilly admitted slowly. She looked at each member of the group in turn before her gaze settled on Daniel. “Who’s your mother?”

“I think I ought to tell you about how I came to live here, shouldn’t I?” Daniel said quietly, leading Lilly toward the house. “You’ve been patient long enough.”

“If you aren’t ready to tell me, then you don’t—” Lilly began, but he interrupted her with a small smile.

While it was sweet of her to be so patient with him, he knew it was time to tell her everything.

She was his wife now, and if he wanted this relationship to work, then he couldn’t hide this anymore—especially not if his mother really did want to speak with him.

*Perhaps it’s for the best that this has happened,* he thought to himself.

If the letter had never arrived, he might not have ever been ready to tell Lilly the truth about his mother—he could have just kept putting it off indefinitely.

At least this forced his hand.

“No, it’s alright. You deserve to know, and there’s no point in

hiding it anymore, not with the letter.” He cleared his throat, took a deep breath in, and then began his story.

“If you want to understand why I was taken in in the first place, I suppose I should tell you a little more about Abel. It’s the cruelest irony in the world that a man with such a kind heart couldn’t have children of his own.

“He told me that he and his wife wanted to start a family more than they wanted anything else in the world, but they just couldn’t conceive. His wife was barren, and eventually they just learned to accept that they would never be parents.

“About a year before I was born, Abel’s wife passed. She’s actually buried in a spot on the ranch, so she’ll always be close to him.”

“That’s very sweet,” Lilly said quietly, but it was obvious from her tone that she was no more enlightened as to how any of this was relevant to the letter he had received.

Daniel carried on, “One day, he opens his door and *very nearly* steps on a pile of rags that someone had left on his porch. Then, to his surprise, that pile of rags starts wriggling about, screaming it’s little lungs out, and as it turned out—”

“*You* were the little pile of rags?” she guessed, smiling gently.

“I was the little pile of rags. My mother had bundled me in whatever she could find, and left me on Abel’s doorsteps with a note.

“It only had my name, nothing else. *Daniel Whitby*. Now, Abel says he took one look at me and knew he would never be able to let me go to someone else, so he took me in there and then.



“I think... I think he saw me as his only chance to have a family, and figured he would be the only chance *I* would ever have, as well. He raised me like his own son, because to him, that’s what I am.”

They made their way up onto the porch steps, where they spent most of their evenings together now, watching as the sun dipped lower and lower in the horizon before disappearing completely in the blink of an eye.

The mood was much different now when they lowered themselves onto the wooden steps side by side.

“That note was the only thing my mother ever gave me,” he explained. “Since that day, neither Abel or I have ever heard anything from her, and I think over time I stopped even thinking of her as a real person.

“She just became this... figure, this spirit of a person that hung over everything I did. I never thought I would ever hear from her until this letter came, and now I don’t know what to think at all.”

He finished the speech with a nervous laugh, letting out a shaky breath.

It was the most he’d ever spoken about his mother to anyone besides Abel or Jill, and although it was terrifying to lay his soul so bare to Lilly, there was something good about it, too.

Once the truth was out there, he almost felt lighter, like the pressure of it had been weighing him down, and now he had someone to help share the burden with him.

“I have so many questions now,” he admitted. “All the questions I

thought I would never have an answer to, they're all just coming back to me in one go.

"All of the times I've wanted to ask *why* she made the choice she did, *how* she could make it... I want to know if she regretted it immediately, if it was hard for her to do. How often does she think about me?"

He trailed off into silence again, staring out over the ranch. This was the place he had been abandoned, but it was also the place he had taken his first steps, said his first word, ridden his first horse.

It was his home.

But as much as he had always adored the ranch, and the wide swathes of land that stretched out in every direction, it had always felt to him like something was missing. There was a hole somewhere inside him that he had never been able to fill.

"I think the biggest question you now have to answer is..." Lilly frowned, stopping herself. "This might sound callous, and I'm sorry if it does, but—"

"I need to figure out if I even want to get into contact with her," Daniel finished for her, nodding slowly. "No, I know that. I..."

"To be honest with you, I'd never really imagined I would ever have the chance to do so."

"You didn't even wonder what it would be like to meet her?"

"Of course I did," he sighed and scowled down at the letter in his hand, as if it was possibly to blame for this entire situation.

“But I never imagined I would ever get any *answers* to all my questions. Whenever I thought about meeting her, it was always more like...”

He gestured around the room, pausing as he tried to figure out a way to describe it.

The scenario had always seemed so far-fetched and strange to him that he'd felt free to imagine meeting a faceless, nameless mother and asking all of the questions he'd ever wanted, but it had never been anything more than a distant fantasy.

“When you were a child, were you ever bullied?”

Lilly looked confused. “Excuse me?”

“Was there ever a little girl who was mean to you? A girl who, I don't know, called you names? Made you feel bad about yourself?”

Lilly wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Yes.”

“Did you ever imagine one day getting up the strength to confront that girl? I mean, coming right up to her and telling her exactly what you thought of her, maybe even fighting her for all the things she'd said to you?”

Lilly's cheeks turned pink at the thought and she scrunched up her face, looking a little embarrassed. “Perhaps.”

“Did you ever actually plan on confronting the girl in real life?”

“Of course not!”

“Well, that was what it was like when I imagined meeting my

mother. Whenever I thought about it, it was always just this untouchable, ridiculous goal that I knew I would never be able to achieve.

“I never seriously thought about whether I would want to meet her or not, because every time I imagined asking her all the questions I had, it just seemed like a dream.”

He sighed, dropping his head into his hands. “That sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? I must look pathetic to you right now.”

“Don’t say that,” Lilly scolded him gently, resting a hand on his knee. “You’re not ridiculous, and you’re certainly not pathetic. Don’t talk about yourself like that.

“It’s obvious that what your mother did to you hurt you more than she could have ever imagined. You’re still living with her decision all these years later, so don’t... don’t talk about yourself so badly.”

It was hard not to, though. After all of these years of self-doubt and pain, thinking this way about himself was what came naturally to Daniel.

He knew he should have taken comfort in the fact that he’d mustered up the courage to confide in his wife, but he couldn’t even bring himself to feel that.

“This all just feels like it’s too much,” he whispered without looking up at Lilly. “It’s like I’ve been waiting my whole life for this moment to come, but somehow I’m still not prepared for it now.”

After more than twenty years, if he wasn’t ready to face his mother, would he ever be?

**I**t was hard to see Daniel in this state. Lilly felt the same way she had done when they had encountered Missy in the town—hopeless, lost, and completely out of her depth.

She wanted to help take a little of the pain away, to ease the burden that seemed to be crushing him, but she had no idea of how to go about doing that.

Was there anything she could say that would make him feel better? She doubted very much that the words existed to do that, and even if they did, she had no idea of what they were.

So, rather than say anything at all, she simply laid one hand against his back between his shoulder blades, and rubbed her thumb over the coarse fabric of his work shirt in what she hoped was a comforting gesture.

It wasn't much, but she wanted to show him that she was there for him.

Lilly decided it was best not to push him to speak before he was ready to. If she had learned anything about Daniel over the past weeks she had spent with him, it was that he needed to be allowed

time to open up of his own accord.

He didn't seem to like being forced into talking about particularly difficult topics. Though, to be absolutely fair to him, no one did.

It took a few minutes, but eventually Daniel's shallow, labored breathing returned to normal and he straightened up, lifting his head. He puffed out his cheeks before letting out a sigh, and as his shoulders relaxed a little, he turned to look at Lilly.

He seemed calmer now, less panicked than when she had found him on the floor with Andrew, but there was an undeniable sadness in his eyes.

*How painful has all of this been for him? she wondered. Has he been hauling all of this agony around with him since he was a child? That must have weighed on his heart...*

She couldn't imagine how difficult it would be to feel like your own family didn't want you. It had been unbearable to have her parents ripped from her in the way that they had been, but at least Lilly had never once questioned their love for her.

Daniel, it seemed, didn't have that luxury. He'd grown up saddled with the doubt that came from abandonment, from a mother walking away.

*Walking away...*

She'd heard someone else use those words when talking about Daniel. Those were the words Missy had used during their trip into town, and it was those words that had upset him so much.

"This is what Missy meant..." Lilly murmured out loud.

“That day in town, this is what she was talking about, wasn’t it? She was talking about your mother. She knew, didn’t she?”

“Yes,” Daniel whispered, sounding almost ashamed by the admission, as though it was something to feel guilty about. “She knew.”

Perhaps it was cruel, but she couldn’t help but feel a little relieved at the realization. Since she had first met Missy, all of the quiet, snide comments the other woman had made to Lilly had only led her to one conclusion.

She’d spent so long worrying that Daniel was pining for a lover who had scorned his affections, when in reality, the pain he had suffered was nothing of the sort.

This whole time, Missy had been talking about his *mother*, not herself and her own relationship with Daniel.

All of the worrying Lilly had done had been for nothing. She had worried her relationship with Daniel would crumble if he decided his heart belonged to another woman, all because of a misunderstanding.

“May I see it?” she asked quietly, looking down at the letter, which was still gripped tightly in his left fist.

Daniel looked from the letter to Lilly hesitantly, and then nodded. “Sure.”

He handed it over to her, and watched as she smoothed it out over her knee to read it a little more easily.

At its core, the letter sounded like a message of love, but as she

read it over, Lilly couldn't help but feel as though there was something amiss.

It felt like there was just something *strange* about this whole situation, but she couldn't quite put her finger on what it was.

"After all these years, it's good to know she's been thinking about me just as much as I've been thinking about her," Daniel said quietly.

Lilly couldn't blame him for feeling like that—a lifetime of wondering if he was loved by his own mother was coming to an end with this note.

"She doesn't say why she's only decided to write to you now, after all this time." Lilly frowned, re-reading the letter in case she had missed a detail.

She hadn't—all she'd talked about was how much she missed him, that she'd wanted to talk to him but had never been able to do so.

"Perhaps she didn't have the opportunity—maybe she had to leave town."

Lilly frowned, cocking her head to one side. Something still didn't sit right with her.

"But then... why not come here and tell you herself? It clearly seems as though she knows where you've been all this time.

"And if she was able to write to you now, why not do it sooner? She knows you're still at the ranch, I just—"

"I don't know why," Daniel snapped, taking her by surprise as he



snatched the letter back, suddenly defensive. “But that doesn’t matter, does it?”

“The only thing that matters is that she’s writing *now*.”

Lilly hesitated, looking down at the letter he had clutched in his hands. She hadn’t meant to upset him, but she needed to be honest.

“Don’t you think it should matter? I thought you wanted answers from her about—”

“I do want answers.” Daniel stuffed the letter deep into his pocket as he stood up, so quickly that Lilly jerked away from him. “Of course I want answers.

“What I don’t want is more *questions*. Why are you talking about her like this, like she’s a criminal who ought to be interrogated? She’s my mother, Lilly.”

“I understand that,” Lilly assured him gently, trying to soothe him. She hadn’t meant to upset him so much, but this was obviously a more sensitive topic for him that she had anticipated.

“I’m sorry. She’s not a criminal, I didn’t think that of her at all. I just meant that after all this time, perhaps it wouldn’t be the worst idea to be a little...”

A little what? Skeptical? Cautious? Wary?

All of those words did seem to make it sound as though she didn’t trust his mother’s word, which—to be absolutely honest—Lilly didn’t.

The woman had been gone from his life for more than twenty years, she'd put him through unimaginable suffering, but now with a single letter she was giving him hope for a grand reconciliation. It was only natural to be—

“Prudent,” she finished, finally. It felt like the least offensive way of putting it.

Even so, Daniel didn't look pleased to hear anything less than complete support of his mother, and he frowned at her, shaking his head.

“She's my *mother*,” he repeated, curling his lip. “My *mother*, Lilly.”

And without another word, Daniel turned on his heel and left her alone, on the steps of their home. She could only watch as he marched down the narrow path that led away from their house, before disappearing into one of the fields.

With an exasperated sigh, Lilly dropped her head into her hands. Perhaps she'd gone too far, pushed him too much on the one thing he was the most guarded about.

Maybe it would have been better if she had just kept her reservations to herself, and acted like she was completely overjoyed for him.

As she looked out over the ranch, towards the field Daniel had headed into, she only hoped that he would calm down enough for them to be able to talk.

If not, what would that mean for their future together?

**S***he doesn't know what she's talking about,* Daniel told himself

as he paced along the boundary fence of the ranch, far from the house.

When he'd stormed off and left Lilly alone on their porch, he hadn't had a plan or a place to go.

He only wanted to get as far away as possible, and when he'd finally come to his senses, he found his feet had carried him to the edge of the property.

Daniel leaned heavily against the fence post, letting out a trembling breath that he hadn't realized he was holding in. "She doesn't understand."

Lilly had never gone through anything like this in her life, so it was only natural that she wouldn't really be able to wrap her mind around what was happening, he supposed.

The circumstances under which she had lost her own parents were so vastly different to those he had found himself in, so she just didn't *understand*.

His grip on the wooden post tightened until his knuckles turned white, and he drew in another raggedy breath as a little voice of doubt sounded in the back of his head.

*What if she does understand? What if she understands all of this better than you do?*

Normally, Daniel prided himself on being a rational man.

One of the skills Abel had passed down to him when teaching him how to run a ranch was to set his emotions aside—a property could crumble into dust if a man let his heart make all of his decisions for him.

For the most part, Daniel was able to do that, but apparently, when it came to his mother, he simply couldn't.

She was his blind spot: although—or maybe *because*—he had never met her, where she was concerned, he couldn't bring himself to think logically.

Lilly didn't face the same predicament, though. She had an advantage over Daniel because she didn't have to push down her emotions to see clearly, she could simply look at the evidence that was in front of her and draw conclusions from that.

So what if she was right to question the letter?

*Think about this*, he told himself, *if the situation were reversed, what would you say to her?*

He wanted to believe that if he were in Lilly's shoes and she in his, he still wouldn't question the letter. He wanted so badly to say that she was wrong for questioning his mother, but the longer he stood

there, the harder it was to believe that.

The timing was odd, he had to admit. It was strange, after all these years, that his mother would reach out to him like this.

She'd had two decades to write to him—why decide to do so now?

*Perhaps she was nervous I would reject her*, he reasoned.

*What if she thought I would be angry for everything that has happened, and it's taken her this long to contact me because she was worried I would lash out?*

It was possible that was the reason she had waited so long to try and talk to him. But even if that was the case, and she had been so desperate to know how he was faring, would she not have contacted Abel?

She could have written to him over the years asking after Daniel, but the old man hadn't mentioned anything to him.

*What if she needs money? She could have come to me now, hoping I would take pity on her.*

She hadn't mentioned anything about money in her letter, but that didn't mean it wasn't a concern of hers.

If that was the truth, and she really was struggling, would Daniel give her some money to help out? Would he offer her something, even though she had given him nothing in life but his name?

He didn't know the answer to that. There was so much he didn't know, so many unanswered questions in front of him, and it felt like his head was about to burst when he thought about them for

too long.

And on top of all of that was the matter of his new wife. He shouldn't have snapped at her like that and lost his temper, and guilt was already starting to creep in.

He was supposed to be trying to give her reasons to want to stay with him, not pushing her even further away.

He dropped into the long grass with a heavy sigh, letting his head fall back against the fence post. Just when he had started to believe that everything was going well, and that he could settle into a nice normal life, this had come out of nowhere.

What was he supposed to do now?

When Daniel returned to the house a few hours later, it was quiet. There was a plate of food waiting for him in the kitchen, but Lilly was nowhere in sight.

He ate alone in silence, glancing up every so often to look at the wall that separated the kitchen from their bedroom, wondering if that would be where he would find his wife. If it was, would she even want to see him?

He must have upset her, storming off the way he did.

He cleaned his plate off, taking his time to make sure it was spotless, and even then he stayed hunched over it, wiping the surface over and over again. Then he straightened the chairs at the table and cleaned that, too.

He was just doing whatever he could to stall time, hoping that if he waited for long enough, Lilly would already be asleep when he walked into the room.

She wasn't.

There was a finite amount of cleaning and straightening of furniture he could do in the sparsely decorated house, and he found himself at the door to the bedroom far sooner than he would have hoped.

Lilly was still awake when he pushed the door open and poked his head around, sat on the bed with her back to the door. He saw her tense up a little at the creak of the door opening, and he hesitated before stepping over the threshold.

"You're back."

Her voice was quiet and barely carried across the room to the doorway. It didn't sound as though she was happy to see him again.

"Yes, I am." He cleared his throat and approached the bed, perching on the end of it.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lilly shuffle away from him just a little, and his heart sank. She didn't want him there.

She was upset with him, and rightly so after his behavior.

A heavy, uncomfortable silence settled between them while Daniel searched for the right words to express how he felt.

There was so much to talk about that he hardly knew where to

start, so he began with two simple words. "I'm sorry."

Lilly's head lifted sharply at that, and she turned to look at him. "You're sorry?"

"You don't have an ounce of malice in your heart," he continued, unable to bring himself to look at her properly. "I know you weren't trying to hurt me with what you said about my mother."

"It doesn't matter that I didn't *mean* to hurt you. I managed to, whether I meant to or not."

"You were trying to be reasonable, trying to stop me from getting carried away." Daniel stared down at his hands, which were clasped tightly in his lap.

"After all these years, it's only rational to wonder what she wants from me, and that's what you were doing. It's what I should have done, but I just got so caught up with that letter..."

"I understand."

Daniel heard the rustling of sheets, felt the bed shift beneath him as Lilly stood and moved so that she was by his side. She settled into the space next to him, and reached out to take one of his hands.

"After all this time, I can't imagine what you're going through."

*She isn't angry with me*, he thought, looking down at their hands before slowly drawing his gaze up to her face. Her lips were pulled into a small smile, but she didn't exactly look happy.

Daniel couldn't blame her for being upset. All of this must have



been such a shock to her—she'd moved across the country, leaving behind everything she had ever known, and now she was being pulled into this.

And to make matters worse for her, he hadn't been as forthcoming as he should have been. He'd been keeping her in the dark, pushing her away just like he did with everyone else, when he really should have been embracing her, opening up to her.

He struggled to talk about his own emotions, and always had done. When it came to talking about his mother, it only became more difficult.

He hadn't even opened up to Abel about how he really felt about the woman, and whether he wanted to see her.

"It's easier to say that all I've ever wanted is my mother, but I don't really know if that's the truth," he murmured, frowning. "I went through stages throughout my life, and I felt differently during each one.

"I remember when I was young, I wanted a mother just so the taunting would stop. But I didn't necessarily want *my* mother, if that makes sense?"

"It does," Lilly assured him, nodding.

"Sometimes I wanted her because I had no idea what it felt like to have a mother. Sometimes I wanted to be comforted, to be held.

"And then other times I was just so angry with her... I was so furious with her for abandoning me, with nothing but a note.

"When I felt like that, I knew I never wanted to see her. I was

better off without her. But then as I got a little older, I just wanted to meet her, just one time.

“I just wanted to talk to her for a little while.”

“That’s all?”

“I just wanted to know *why*,” he whispered, hearing his own voice crack with emotion. “Why didn’t she want me?”

“Oh, Daniel...” Lilly’s grip on his hand tightened a little, and she wound her free arm around his shoulder to pull him in close.

It was an awkward one-armed embrace, only made more difficult from her petite frame, but he sank into it nonetheless.

With a teary, trembling breath, he buried his face into the crook of Lilly’s neck and dropped her hand to wrap both arms around her middle.

“It’s alright,” she whispered, rubbing one hand up and down his back slowly, soothing his ragged breathing. “It’s okay, you don’t have to say anything more.”

Daniel wasn’t sure he could have said another word even if he’d wanted to. His throat was clogged with tears, his heart was pounding in his chest so hard it was a miracle he couldn’t hear it, and his head spun.

Over the years, he had become so good at burying all of this down deep inside him, only showing these raw emotions to a select few, and now it felt so strange to actually allow another person close enough to him to see the truth.

He couldn't be certain of how long they sat there together, with Lilly cradling him close to her chest. At some point his breathing evened out, his heartbeat returned to normal, and he was able to sit up properly.

When he did, she pushed his messy locks back from his forehead and suggested they both get some sleep.

Her voice was so soft and welcoming that he didn't need to be asked twice, and almost as soon as he had stripped out of his day clothes and crawled beneath the sheets, he was asleep.

As he closed his eyes, Daniel was vaguely aware of Lilly crawling into bed beside him, and felt her weight shifting around on the bed.

He couldn't be certain of it, but as the heavy blanket of sleep fell over him, he thought he felt her arm around his waist, cuddling up to him.

Perhaps... or perhaps it was just foolish hope.

**I**t had been four days since the letter from Daniel's mother had arrived, and the ranch had been notably tense.

Daniel himself was quiet, keeping his head down so he could focus on his work. He would speak when spoken to, but even then he seemed unfocused, as if he wasn't *really* there with them.

The rest of the family seemed to be tiptoeing around him, taking care not to upset or offend him.

There was something strained and nervous about their voices when they spoke to him, and even Jill—by far the most outspoken person on the ranch—seemed hesitant to approach him.

No one knew what to say to him, because no matter what they did, it seemed his mind was on other things. There was no way to distract him or lighten his mood, because the only thing he could focus on was his mother.

He never said as much to them, of course, but it was obvious. What else would have him so quiet and reserved?

None of them could even speak to each other about it. It was as if

they had all sworn an oath of silence when it came to the letter, because no one broached the topic.

They talked about anything else—the weather, the crops, the cow that charged at Andrew one morning—but they all avoided the one thing they were all thinking about.

For four days, Lilly dreaded seeing the arrival of the post. It was delivered to the main house every day, and each morning she would go and fetch it, delivering any to Daniel if someone else hadn't already done so.

Every morning following the arrival of the letter, she would feel a knot of anxiety tighten in the pit of her stomach whenever she saw a stack of post in the kitchen of the main house.

Thankfully, for three days, when she didn't spot that same handwriting from the first letter, she would be able to relax a little.

It was on the fourth morning that she realized her anxiety was warranted. There, in amongst bills and a letter from an old friend of Jill's, was that same handwriting.

Daniel's mother had written to him again.

A part of Lilly—perhaps selfishly—had hoped his mother would never write again. If his mother really was writing to him after all these years, she may not have been aware of how much pain she had caused her son, but Lilly was.

She had seen all of the years of hurt and loneliness and confusion in his eyes when he had talked to her about his mother, all but breaking down into tears as he did so.

It might have been the kindest thing to leave her infant in the hands of a man who would be able to take care of him, but that didn't mean Daniel wasn't still suffering from her decision.

*Wouldn't it be kinder for her to just let him be? If she really loved him, wouldn't she want him to move on from his past, and live happily?* Lilly thought as she picked up the letter, turning it over in her hands in the hopes of seeing a return address on the back.

There wasn't one, of course.

*What if these letters are just keeping him tethered to his pain?* she wondered.

*If she keeps writing to him, will he just keep living in the past, wondering why she made the choice that she did? Will he be happy?*

Her fingers curled tightly around the envelope as she glanced about the kitchen, quickly checking the doorways and windows. There was no one about, she could take the letter and hide it, and make sure Daniel never saw it.

He wouldn't have to get upset again the way he had done when he'd read the first letter. Perhaps he'd wonder why his mother never wrote again, but then, *maybe*, in time. he would be able to forget about it and move on.

No. No, that wouldn't happen.

He had gone twenty-five years without any form of communication with his mother, and he still hadn't managed to move on from the pain she had caused him.

Even if he had begun to heal from it, any progress had been

undone the moment he had read that first letter, so even if she hid this one from him, there would be no way he would forget about it.

He would just keep waiting, hoping for her to write again. Perhaps he'd feel like she'd abandoned him all over again.

Lilly sighed, shaking her head slowly. She couldn't do that to him, and besides, she had no right to meddle in his affairs like this.

Even if she told herself it was for Daniel's own sake, she couldn't hide a letter from his mother and pretend it had never arrived. She couldn't lie to him like that.

She kept sorting through the letters on the off chance that there was anything else for Daniel, when she came across a letter that was addressed to her.

It came as a surprise, not only because it was the first letter she had received since moving to the ranch, but also because the handwriting was so familiar.

Lilly looked from the letter addressed to her, to the one meant for Daniel, and her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach. Both were written by the same hand.

Daniel's mother had written to her.

*But why?* she wondered, glancing over her shoulder again, as if someone might have snuck up on her in the past few moments. There was no one there, of course, because everyone else was busy working.

Daniel and Andrew were in the fields, Abel had gone into town a

little earlier, and Jill was polishing silverware out on the porch, where she could enjoy the warmth of the sun.

Lilly was alone, but that didn't stop the rapid beating of her heart, so fast that it almost hurt.

*Why is Daniel's mother writing to me? What could she want?*

Quickly, Lilly ripped the envelope open and pulled the letter out, flattening it against the kitchen table. This letter was short, far shorter than Daniel's first, and even from skimming it she could tell it took on a very different tone.

*Do not tell my son that I have written to you.*

*Please do not mistake this letter as a threat, but as a warning. I understand that you have married my son only recently. Please know that this was a mistake.*

*There are many things that you do not know about my son, and I do not have the time to write them to you now, but know that they will drive your marriage apart.*

*You should not have married my son.*

*I know you do not love him. You cannot love him, because you hardly know him—you are strangers.*

*But if you do care for him at all, be aware that the best course of action is for you to leave town, and return to the city you came from. If you do not, you will see the end of your marriage under much more unfortunate terms.*

*Again, please do not tell my son that I have written to you.*



Lilly felt sick. She wasn't sure what she had been hoping to find when she opened the letter, but it certainly wasn't this.

Even though his mother had claimed the letter wasn't a threat, Lilly couldn't help but admit that she *felt* threatened by it.

*You will see the end of your marriage under much more unfortunate terms.* What was that supposed to mean?

And what did she mean when she said there were 'many things' Lilly didn't know about Daniel? What could this woman, who hadn't seen him in twenty-five years, know about Daniel that Lilly herself didn't?

Was Daniel keeping something else secret from her? Perhaps something darker than what she had already learned of him?

Whatever it was, if Daniel's mother was to be believed, then it would be something that would drive them apart.

Lilly closed her eyes for a few moments, leaning heavily on the kitchen table. She tried to think clearly, but it was as if there was too much going on inside her head.

There was too much to think about, and she couldn't focus on anything for long enough to make sense of it.

*Stop it*, she scolded herself, taking a deep breath. *You have to focus. Panicking about this letter isn't going to solve anything.*

She took another deep breath through her nose, and then another. Slowly, it felt as though the jumbled mess inside her head was starting to clear, and she could begin to think again.

The letter was right about one thing—she hardly knew anything about Daniel. They were still virtually strangers, despite the fact that they were married.

*But I do know a few things*, she reminded herself, straightening up.

*I know about his mother, I'm starting to learn about how badly that impacted him when he was a child. I know it still haunts him to this day.*

Beyond that, though, she couldn't think of much else about her new husband. From what she had seen of him so far, he was a decent man.

He was kind and generous, and although he seemed nervous and a little awkward around her, he was making an effort to be a good husband.

He had hand-picked flowers for her as a gift; he had pushed himself to open up to her despite how difficult it was for him to do so.

What if none of that was real, though? What if Daniel wasn't as kind and thoughtful as she thought?

If he was hiding another secret from her, something darker and more disgraceful than anything he had told her so far, then he couldn't be as good as she believed.

Lilly's hands trembled as she folded the letter, tucking it into the sleeve of her dress for safekeeping.

She hadn't had any indication that Daniel was keeping something else from her, but if this letter was right, and there was something

worse in his past, then that meant one of two things was also true.

Either Daniel was hiding this from Jill and Abel as well, or they both knew and were helping him hide it.

She wasn't sure which was worse. On the one hand, she hated the thought that everyone on the ranch was hiding something from her, but on the other hand...

What kind of a secret would a man hide from his whole family? And more importantly, did she want to be married to the man who *had* that kind of secret in his past?

Whatever the secret was, it was something serious enough that his mother had suggested she leave town. Could she do that?

She had begun to settle into her life at the ranch, and she was even starting to feel more relaxed in Daniel's company until this had begun.

This place felt warm, it felt inviting. It felt like what she had been craving ever since she had lost her parents, and she wasn't sure she could give that up again.

If she went back to New York now, she would have nothing. Perhaps she would be able to rent that tiny box of an apartment again, but did she want to?

Did she want to go back to living in that place where the sunlight hardly shone, and the walls were so thin she could hear fights on the street outside?

Did she want to live in a place that felt so cold?

No, she didn't. Even though she'd only spent a few weeks on the ranch, she'd had a taste of what it would be like to have a family once more, and she didn't want to give that up now.

But as she looked down at the letter, she realized she might not have a choice.

**I**t was still painfully hot when Daniel returned home from work. A bead of sweat rolled down the nape of his neck as he made his way up the steps of the porch, kicking off any stray dust that clung to his boots.

He went to open the door, but paused there for a few brief seconds, his hand hovering over the handle.

Every day since the letter had arrived, he would return home with the same nerves filling his chest until it became hard to breathe.

As he made his way up the wooden steps, the same question would fill his mind: would there be another letter waiting for him?

*I won't know if I spend the evening standing around out here*, he reminded himself sternly, forcing himself to push the door open and walk inside.

Lilly was waiting for him in the kitchen when he arrived, her hands folded neatly—and in front of her, on the kitchen table, was a single envelope.

Daniel's heart leapt to his throat, and he swallowed nervously as

he approached the table. "Is it from her?"

"It looks like it, yes." Lilly looked up at him slowly. "Do you want me to leave you to read it in peace?"

He hesitated. He couldn't be sure what would be in that letter, whether it was good news or bad; his mother could be writing to him just so that they could get to know each other after all this time, or she could have an ulterior motive.

Whatever it was, though, he didn't feel like he wanted to be alone when he found out. "Could you stay?"

"Of course I can."

Daniel eased himself into the spare seat at the kitchen table and stared down at the letter, drawing in one slow breath, and then another.

His hand hovered over the envelope for a moment, but then he pulled back quickly to look up at Lilly, frowning. Something was wrong.

She seemed different this evening, but he wasn't quite sure how to describe what it was about her that seemed so odd to him.

Something about her mood, her gaze, even the tone of her voice, it all seemed... colder than normal.

"Are you alright?" he asked hesitantly. Lilly nodded, but she still didn't meet his gaze properly.

Her eyes flickered up to his so quickly that he might have missed it, and then she went back to looking at the letter. "You should

open it and see what she wants.”

Daniel frowned at his wife. It was unlike her to be so distant and reserved, and he wanted to press her and find out what was on her mind, but whatever it was, it could wait.

Right now, he had other matters to focus on. He had to find out what was in the letter.

Without another word, Daniel snatched the envelope up from the table and tore it open, tugging a neatly folded sheet of paper from it. This letter was shorter than the first, but it opened the same way.

*My dearest son.*

“It’s from her,” he whispered. “She wrote to me again.”

“What does it say?” Lilly asked. Her voice still had that strange, distant quality to it, as though she didn’t particularly care whether or not he answered her.

*My dearest son,*

*I apologize for waiting so long to write to you again, especially after all these years apart. I know you must have so many questions for me, and I fear I may not be able to answer them all, but I will try my best to do so.*

*I expect the most pressing question you must have for me is as to why I left you the way I did, and I promise you my darling boy, I will tell you everything as soon as possible.*

*All I want is to try and explain my actions, and do whatever I can to*

*try and make amends for all this time you have spent alone.*

*I hope next time I write to you, I will be able to give you a place to meet me, so we can talk face to face. I hope to see how well you have grown.*

*Until we meet again,*

*Your adoring mother*

Tears blurred his vision as the letter slipped from between his fingers and fell to the table.

She hadn't asked him for money or charity, or to help her with some horrible tragedy that had befallen her in recent years. The only thing she wanted was to explain.

She wanted to give him the answers he had been searching for so desperately. It was almost like she could read his mind—she knew what he wanted, and she was offering it out to him.

All of the confusion and pain he had suffered through in his life, all of the worry that there was something wrong with him...

It was finally beginning to feel like there was an end in sight to all of that.

*She wants me.*

In among all of the noise in his head, that was the one thing he could focus on. After all this time, his mother *did* want him.

She'd talked about making amends, perhaps even repairing the bond she had severed years earlier. Was he finally going to have the family he'd always wanted?



“She wants to meet,” he managed to choke out, wiping the tears that splashed down his cheeks. “She wants to meet me.

“She says she’ll find a place where we can talk, and she’ll answer all the questions I have. After all this time, I was starting to lose hope that I would ever find that, and yet...”

He trailed off into silence, blinking back the tears that threatened to fall onto the page and smudge his mother’s precious handwriting. Lilly remained silent, though, and when his vision cleared enough, he looked up to see a strange expression on her face.

She was worrying her lower lip between her teeth, her brows knitted into a frown, and it didn’t seem as though she’d heard anything he’d said. “Lilly?”

The sound of her own name brought her back to reality, and she blinked rapidly before looking up at him, almost surprised. “That’s good news.”

“Are you sure you’re alright?” he asked, leaning toward her, his brows knitted into a frown.

She hardly seemed to be paying attention to a word he’d said, like she was concerned about something else.

“Is something wrong?”

“No,” she answered curtly, without meeting his gaze. “Everything is fine. I’m just quite... tired. I think I’ll lie down, rest my head.”

Without even waiting for a response from Daniel, she pushed her chair out and left the room, murmuring a quiet “good night” as she

left.

Daniel opened his mouth to say something—anything—to her, but before he could think of what to say, she was already gone.

All he could do was listen to the sound of her retreating footsteps, and then wince as the bedroom door swung shut at the end of the hallway.

Something was definitely wrong. The last time he'd read a letter from his mother, Lilly had been by his side.

She had read it, too, and had seemed almost as anxious as he was to get to the bottom of what was going on.

When he'd opened up to her about wanting answers, she'd held him in her arms, but now... He may as well have been talking to a completely different person.

Could something have happened to her during the day that he didn't know about? Had one of the other ranch hands said something that had upset her?

Had *he* done something to upset her without even realizing it?

Or perhaps it was something else entirely. A cold sense of dread dawned on Daniel as he looked from the letter in his hands to the wall that separated the two rooms.

He had always been so afraid that there was something inherently unlovable about him, something his own mother had seen as a baby, and his wife, if he were to ever find one, would eventually see too.

Bit by bit, Abel had managed to calm those fears just a little, and over the weeks he had spent with Lilly, he had stopped allowing those thoughts to consume him.

What if that was a mistake, though?

What if he had been right to worry about Lilly seeing something awful in him? Was she starting to see it now?

Now that she had seen the letters for herself, was she starting to think that his mother might have been right to leave him?

Was it possible that the thing he had feared the most was finally coming true?

Daniel looked down at the letter again, and let out a slow sigh. At least he would have his answers soon enough.

Daniel had to know something was wrong with her.

Lilly could tell he was suspicious from the way he stole glances at her every so often, almost like he was checking that she was still there beside him.

He would ask if she was alright, repeating the question like he hoped he would get a more substantial answer than “I’m fine, Daniel”—but, of course, that answer never came.

She wasn’t fine. All she could think about was the letter, which she had tucked away in her traveling trunk for safekeeping.

While Daniel worked in the fields she pulled it out and read it over and over again, going back over the words until they were burned into her mind.

She was frantic, hoping that with each time she reread it, she would be able to glean some new understanding, but she couldn’t. No matter how many times she read and reread the letter, she only came away with more questions.

The worst part about all of this was that there was no one she

could talk to.

Everyone on the ranch was either a friend or family to Daniel, and she knew if she went to them with the letter, they would tell him everything—and he was the one person who *couldn't* know about it.

It was almost impossible to keep it to herself, and in the days that followed she found herself going back and forth, caught between her desire to share her secret and her fear of what might happen if she did.

Three days after the letter arrived, she paced the floor of their shared bedroom, marching back and forth with the letter clasped between her hands.

It was scrunched up now from all the times she'd pulled it out of the trunk to read it again before stuffing it back into the depths unceremoniously.

*What's the worst that would happen if I were to tell him?* she wondered. *Perhaps if he knew about the letter, we would be able to figure out whatever this problem is.*

*Maybe we could overcome it together.*

But could she really guarantee that would be the outcome if she were to go to Daniel with this information? What if he didn't react well to hearing about the letter?

What if her fears were justified and the secret was about *him*, something he *wanted* to keep hidden from her? If that was the case, she wasn't sure it would be the best idea to tell him about it.

*It feels silly taking orders from a scrap of paper*, Lilly thought to herself, looking down at it once more.

She was sick of the sight of the wretched thing and wished she could find the strength to just burn it, but something was stopping her. It was the same thing that was stopping her from just telling Daniel about it.

It was a fear of the unknown.

She had no idea what might happen if she destroyed the letter and ignored it. There was a vague mention of possible consequences but no promise of what those might be, and not knowing was probably the worst part of all of this.

So, rather than tearing it to shreds and throwing the pieces in the fire, or bringing it to Daniel when he came back to the house, Lilly just tucked it away in the trunk and tried to forget about it for another night.

The next morning, another letter arrived for her. *Only* for her. There was nothing for Daniel in that same slanted writing, but there was an envelope with her name on it.

Jill was in the kitchen when she arrived, but she didn't seem to notice as Lilly snatched up the letter from the kitchen table and slipped it up the sleeve of her dress.

"I'll just deliver these back home," Lilly murmured, picking up the other letters addressed to Daniel.

She checked and double-checked them on her way out of the

kitchen, but none of them were from his mother.

*She's only written to me. What can that possibly mean?* Lilly wondered as she returned to the house.

She headed inside and dropped the rest of the post carelessly on the table before making her way into the bedroom to read her own letter.

It took her longer than it probably should have to gather up the courage to open the envelope, let alone peek inside and read the contents.

Her fingertips hovered over the seal as she held her breath, afraid of what she might find within. Would there be another instruction to end her marriage without saying a word to Daniel?

*It might not be*, Lilly thought to herself as she picked up the envelope, turning it over in the vain hope that this time there would be a return address waiting for her. There wasn't, of course.

*It might be good news. Perhaps his mother made a mistake, and she's writing to me to apologize.*

*And I can't know whether the news is good or bad until I open it, can I? It's worse not knowing, the suspense alone is making me feel sick.*

As she peeled the envelope open and pulled the letter out, Lilly couldn't help but feel a little foolish for praying that she would find something good inside.

So far, what she had learned from Daniel's mother was far from pleasant, but still she clung to that sliver of hope.

*I hope you received my last letter and followed my instruction to not tell Daniel anything about the correspondence. I ask that you do the same with this one as well.*

*It is of the utmost importance that he does not know about this correspondence yet.*

*It must be a difficult decision to leave your dreams of a family behind and return to New York, but I implore you to do so, for my son's sake. His life could be put into grave danger if you decide to stay here rather than listen to my warning.*

*It is difficult to put your faith in a stranger, especially when I have only contacted you through letters so far, and I understand that this must make the choice before you an even more impossible one.*

*Please meet me in person, so I can better explain all of this to you. I hope that if I can speak with you and help you understand the situation my son is in, you will see for yourself that the right path truly is to leave this place.*

*There is an old well on the west side of town, out toward the abandoned gold mine. It's easy enough to find if you follow the road out of town.*

*Meet me there tonight before sundown, and I'll answer any questions you have.*

*Come alone.*

She almost wished she hadn't read it.

The dream she'd had of raising a family in Colorado, giving them the same life she'd had once upon a time, had never felt so far



away.

How was it that with every single one of these letters from Daniel's mother, her chances at happiness seemed to get further and further from her grasp?

They'd been doing everything right. Daniel was starting to open up to her more and more about his past—albeit only after he'd been forced to by the arrival of the first letter—and Lilly had started to really settle into her life in Colorado.

They deserved the chance to be happy, but it seemed there was always something getting in the way of that. If it wasn't her fears about his past with Missy, it was the letters and his mother.

*Am I just not supposed to have a family?* Lilly wondered, crumpling the letter in her fist. *Am I cursed?*

*The only thing I've ever wanted in my life seems to be the one thing I can't have. First, my parents were taken from me, and now this? It's not fair. It's not fair!*

Lilly buried her face in her hands, letting out a quiet groan of frustration.

It wasn't just the idea of losing her chance at starting a family, that wasn't the only reason she found herself on the brink of tears. She didn't want to leave *Daniel*.

If Lilly left the town and headed back to New York, she would never be able to sit out on the porch again and watch the sun set.

She would never be able to peek out of the kitchen window in the late afternoon, and watch as he made his way down the dirt path

towards the house.

She would never be able to rest her head on his shoulder and feel him slowly but surely relax into her touch. All of that would be gone in the blink of an eye.

Over the weeks, the two had fallen into a routine, and it wasn't one she wanted to give up on. She was the first to wake most mornings, usually before the sun rose.

It was still cold on most of those mornings, and she would snuggle up under the sheets, moving closer to Daniel's body in search of warmth.

Some mornings, if he was especially tired still, he would murmur something semi-intelligible, perhaps let out a gentle snore, and then quickly settle back into sleep.

Most mornings, he would move closer to her, burying his face into the crook of her neck. She liked those few minutes of peace, just relaxing in his company.

She liked listening to him move around the house while she made breakfast. From the kitchen, she could hear the bed creak under his weight as he moved around, as the smell of food and coffee woke him up.

She enjoyed watching as he wandered blearily into the kitchen, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He would smile at her weakly and hold up one hand in a wave as he settled into his seat at the breakfast table, and then let out a yawn.

His voice was often still croaky and quiet, but after a cup of coffee or two it would warm up and return to normal.

Then he would smile properly, thank her for breakfast, and get dressed for work while she cleared the table. On his way out to work, he would kiss her on the cheek, promise to be home in time for dinner, and leave the house.

She would take a break from cleaning to watch as he headed out to the field, her cheek still warm from his touch.

In the evening, as she cooked dinner, she would keep an eye out for him on the off chance that she would be able to spot him coming up the path again.

Sometimes she could, sometimes she missed him, but either way she would know that he was home by the sound of his boots on the porch steps.

The heels of his boots would knock against the wood loudly three times—one for each step—and then he would pause to kick off any stray dirt before he came inside.

He made sure to bring her flowers whenever he could. Sometimes it was a whole bunch that he'd plucked on his way home to her, but if he couldn't collect a lot then he would be sure just to pick one for her.

He promised every day that it was the most beautiful, and always made sure to point out that he hadn't crushed the stems like he'd done with the first bouquet.

Tears welled in Lilly's eyes as she realized all of that was going to be a faint memory if she left town.

Not only that, but Daniel himself would be nothing but a memory—just another warm daydream for her to indulge in during the

cold nights in New York, when she was alone.

He would join her parents in the part of her mind that was always so bittersweet.

She didn't want that. The thought of that happening again with Daniel was agonizing, but at the same time, what would happen if she stayed?

The letter had warned of danger—if she remained in town, would she be putting Daniel's life at risk?

As painful as it would be to walk away from him, Lilly knew she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she knew she was the reason for him getting hurt.

*I don't want to abandon him, though.*

She was caught between two awful choices. Whatever she chose, it seemed like there would be pain for both of them.

Leaving would break her heart, and she hated the thought of Daniel feeling abandoned by her, just like his mother had done years earlier.

*But he can't die because of me. It doesn't matter how painful it will be to leave, if staying puts him in danger... Can I really do that?*

**I** *need to get things back to the way they were.*

Daniel stared up at the house he had built years earlier, the house he had wanted to slowly fill with love, joy and a family of his own. So far, he didn't feel like he had managed to do much of any of that.

In the time that he had been a married man, it felt like the only things he'd managed to fill the house with were anxiety, uncertainty, and arguments.

Before the letter had arrived, things had been going well. They'd been going *really* well, in fact.

In the weeks since the conversation he'd had with Abel, when he'd vowed to show Lilly that there was truly a life worth building in Colorado, things had been peaceful between him and his new wife.

They had grown closer, opening up to each other little by little.

They'd relaxed into each other's company a bit more, and in the few days before the letter had arrived, Daniel had really begun to believe that he would be able to start the family he'd always

dreamed of.

It had been so close he'd almost been able to taste it. And then the letter had arrived, and everything had changed.

He still wasn't sure why everything was different now, but he knew that it was—in the past few days, Lilly had been colder, she had been distant.

She hardly seemed able to meet his gaze, and when the two retired to bed at night, the space between them on the mattress felt even larger than it had done on their wedding night.

It felt like the life he'd worked so hard to achieve was slipping through his fingers, and Daniel knew he had to do everything he could to stop that from happening. He had to start showing her there was something worth staying in Colorado for—him.

Abel had told him about a dance one of the ranchers on the other side of town would be holding next weekend, and he thought perhaps it would be a good chance to spend some time alone with Lilly.

It would be the first time since they'd been married that they would be able to go out into town together and mingle with people as a couple, and the idea excited him. He only hoped she would be just as interested.

As he made his way up the porch steps, Daniel realized he couldn't smell anything through the open kitchen window, which was strange.

Normally he could smell dinner cooking, or, at the very least, he would be able to hear Lilly bustling around inside, preparing food

for them.

There was no sign of their evening meal being made, though.

“Lilly?” he called as he walked into the main hall. “I’m home.”

Nothing. Daniel frowned as he poked his head into the kitchen, looking for his wife.

There was no pot of food waiting, no ingredients had been prepped, no sign that she was even in the house.

*Perhaps she isn’t feeling well*, he wondered, glancing into the front room, which was also empty. *Maybe she didn’t feel well enough to make dinner.*

He made his way into the master bedroom, but that was empty, too.

There were signs Lilly had been there, though—her traveling trunk, which had been pushed against the far wall of the bedroom—was wide open, and it looked like she’d gone through it hastily to pull something out.

Clothes that were normally neatly folded looked as though they’d been pushed around and upended in search of something, and the sleeve of one of her blouses hung out of the edge of the trunk, trailing along the floor.

*What on earth was she looking for?* he wondered, tucking the sleeve back into the trunk before closing the lid again. With a frown, Daniel turned back to the room for any other signs of his wife, and saw only one: the bed.

Ordinarily, the bed was perfectly made, without a crease or dent in the fabric. Today, though, as he neared it, Daniel saw a compression on the sheets, as though someone had sat down on the bed for a long time.

On either side of the indentation, he saw a letter, and his heart sank when he recognized them. They were the letters his mother had written to him.

*Why was she reading them?* he wondered, sinking onto the mattress.

With shaky hands, Daniel picked up the first letter and skimmed over it again before looking at the second.

Lilly had been looking at these, but what had she done afterwards?

*Did she leave me because of these? Did she see that horrible truth about me in them that my mother saw when I was a baby? Was all of this just too much for her? What if—*

No.

Daniel forced himself to stop, shaking his head sharply. It was all too easy to spiral into those thoughts of self-doubt like he always did, but not today.

Things had been going well between him and Lilly, and he wasn't about to let himself get carried away by imagining that she was leaving him because of a few letters.

*Be smart about this*, he told himself, trying to calm his racing heart. *Just because she's gone, that doesn't mean that she's gone for good.*

*She might have just gone into town, and it could be a coincidence that*



*she was reading these beforehand.*

But what if it wasn't? Daniel swallowed nervously as he looked down at the letters again, crumpling them into his pockets.

The first thing he needed to do was see if Lilly was somewhere else on the ranch, and if she'd gone into town, he needed to figure out how long ago she'd left.

Then, and *only* then, he would allow himself to worry.

As he made his way from his home to the main house of the ranch, Daniel told himself that over and over again, but with every ranch hand that he stopped, he felt his heart begin to beat faster and faster until it was almost unbearable.

No one had seen Lilly around, and no one remembered watching her head into town for anything. She hadn't mentioned supplies to anyone, and as Jill had pointed out, if she'd gone for supplies she'd have needed the carriage, which was still in the stables.

She wasn't at home, she wasn't in the main house with Abel and Jill, and it didn't look as though she'd gone into town. As Daniel stood on the porch of the main house and looked over the ranch, he felt a knot of anxiety tighten in his stomach.

"Where are you, Lilly?" he whispered.

“**Q**uit moving around or I’ll shoot.”

Lilly flinched at the sound of the voice on the other side of the bars and looked over her shoulder, frowning at the only other figure in the otherwise abandoned building.

The light was starting to fade now, but the walls of the old jailhouse were so decrepit and crumbling to such a degree that the last few rays of sunlight could shine through the cracks. It wasn’t much—just enough for Lilly to see the face of her captor.

“Don’t look at me like that,” the figure chided, folding one leg daintily over the other. “This is your own doing, you know.”

“I’ve done nothing wrong, Missy,” Lilly whispered, slowly approaching the bars of her cell.

She was careful not to move too quickly or speak too loudly, just in case she spooked the other woman into pulling the trigger.

“If you let me out of here now and take me back to town, we can just forget that this ever—”

“Forget?” Missy echoed. “*Forget?* You mean you’ll be able to go back to your life with Daniel, and what will happen to me?”

“I’ll just be tossed aside again, forgotten about. Abandoned.” She scoffed. “No, no, I can’t let that happen again.”

Lilly shivered against the cool breeze, wrapping her hands around the bars of her cell.

When Daniel had told her about the abandoned structures of the old town, she had never imagined that she would find herself inside one of them with a gun aimed at her chest, and yet here she was.

*I should have known something was wrong*, she cursed herself, eyeing up the barrel of Missy’s revolver.

*I should have realized that something was strange about those letters, but I was so wrapped up in wanting the truth...*

None of it had been real, she knew that now. No matter how desperately Daniel had wanted to believe that his mother was trying to get into contact with him again, that wasn’t what had happened.

His mother had never written a letter to him, had never looked for him in desperation, pining for the son she had abandoned.

His life was in no danger, there was no reason for Lilly to have to leave town. All of it was just a fabrication, a fantasy that had emerged from the mind of one woman.

Missy.

She was the one to write the letters to Daniel, pinpointing exactly the part of his tragic childhood that would hurt the most.

She knew where his wounds were the freshest, the most exposed, and she had learned the best way to make him all the more vulnerable. His mother was his blind spot, the one thing in life that made him toss out all other sense of reason.

Then, she'd written to Lilly, alluding to a great, awful secret that would put Daniel's life in danger. She'd lured Lilly to the outskirts of town, preying on her loyalty to her husband, and as soon as she'd had her alone, she'd revealed herself.

She'd explained the details of her plan, made sure Lilly understood what she wanted, and then, to prove how serious she was, she'd produced a revolver from behind her back and fired a warning shot into the ground by her feet.

"This isn't going to work, Missy," Lilly said quietly. "If you think killing me will make Daniel fall in love with you, then you're wrong. This isn't going to make him—"

"I don't need to *make* Daniel do anything, sweetheart," Missy cooed, standing up so suddenly that Lilly took a step back from the bars instinctively.

The gun was still aimed at her chest, and she knew at any moment the other woman could choose to pull the trigger.

A silence fell between the two of them, before Missy lowered the gun and approached the cell.

She'd brought Lilly to the abandoned jailhouse after meeting her at the well and revealing that she had been the one to send the

letters, and had rather unceremoniously shoved Lilly into one of the old cells.

“You don’t understand, do you?” Missy asked, her voice dangerously quiet. “You don’t understand anything about this situation.

“I don’t have to make Daniel fall in love with me, because he already *is*.”

“If he’s in love with you, then why would he marry me?”

“You’re a distraction,” Missy explained, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “That’s all. You’re distracting him from the reality that he and I are supposed to be together.

“Jill and Abel have been confusing him his whole life, pushing and pulling him in all these different directions, and the poor boy has been so confused that he’s struggling to see the truth.

“*You*, I’m afraid, are just another one of those distractions, and once you’re gone, he’ll be able to see clearly again.”

She tapped the barrel of the revolver gently against the metal bars, smiling. “Of course, once you’re gone, he’ll be sad.

“You’ll have disappeared without a trace, abandoned him just like his mother did, and he’ll be heartbroken. He’ll mourn, he’ll cry, and when he’s been broken by all of this, he’ll realize that he never should have looked at a stranger for his wife.

“He needed a woman who understood him, who understood where he came from.”

“And that’s you?”

“Who else? I’ll be there to comfort him, to hold him when he cries, and eventually, he’ll understand the mistake he made.”

Lilly felt a chill run through her body as she looked into Missy’s eyes and realized how serious the woman was.

When she spoke about this insane plan, this fantasy she’d created to manipulate Daniel, she may as well have been talking about the weather. Her voice was so calm, so matter of fact, that it terrified Lilly.

There had been a woman in New York whom people thought had gone mad with grief, after her husband and son had passed away.

She had wild, unfocused eyes, and whenever she spoke her tone was almost hysterical, manic and frantic. Lilly had always thought that was how insanity looked, but now she couldn’t be so sure.

Missy spoke about her plan so confidently that Lilly might have believed this was how everything was going to play out, if not for the fact that she was living in the middle of the other woman’s fantasy.

It seemed like Missy herself believed everything she was saying, that Daniel was truly in love with her, and only needed to be convinced of that fact.

*I’m going to die here*, Lilly realized, panic gripping her chest like an icy hand, closing around her lungs. *This woman is prepared to kill me for Daniel’s love.*

“Please,” she whispered. “Please, just think about this. Missy, you

aren't a killer."

The other woman smiled coldly and tilted her head to one side. "Of course I'm not. I don't intend on killing anyone, just solving a problem that never should have existed to begin with."

Lilly hugged her arms around herself tightly, looking from Missy's cold, lifeless eyes to the gun in her hand. In that moment, she really believed that Missy didn't see her as a person, just an obstacle in the way of her happiness.

So, of course, she'd have no problem pulling the trigger.

*But she hasn't done it yet, Lilly reminded herself. Save for a warning shot.*

*Perhaps if I can keep her talking for long enough, someone will realize I'm missing from the ranch. The town's not that big, maybe they'll find me before she does something rash.*

But even as she thought it, she knew the chances were slim. Daniel would be working until the afternoon, and probably wouldn't have even come home yet.

Jill was often so busy that she hardly had time to look out for other members of the family, and Abel had a whole ranch to run. It might be hours before anyone noticed she was gone, even longer before they found her.

No, she couldn't rely on that, on the chance that someone might stumble upon her. She needed to find a way out for herself.

The only problem was, Missy had pushed her into a jail cell and locked the door behind her. The only window was barred, and

would have been too small for her to fit through anyway, which meant there was no way of escaping through that.

While the ceiling was partially collapsed in the main body of the jailhouse, the roof above her seemed solid, so she wouldn't be able to climb for freedom.

But...

Lilly's gaze fell on the metal bars of her cell, and she realized there might well be a way out for her.

The bars of the cell and door were thick and had been made too close together for her to slip through them, but they were also old and weathered, after years of exposure.

Close to the ground, Lilly noticed the silver bars were speckled with rust, and the hinges on the door to the cell were almost completely red. Perhaps that would be a way out for her, if she could force the door open?

Of course, in order to do that, she would need a way to distract Missy...



**Y**our adoring mother.

Daniel frowned down at the words on the page in front of him. He'd been so overwhelmed, so excited the first time he'd read that, but now he wasn't sure how he felt.

Of course, he still felt excited to know his mother wanted to be in his life—how could he not be, after wanting it for so long—but he couldn't help but feel as though these letters had also been the beginning of the end.

Lilly had changed after the first letter had arrived. She'd begun to pull away from him, and he still didn't know *why*.

Now, to make matters worse, no one could find her, and it looked as though the letters might have been the reason.

"We still don't know if it's because of those letters," Abel told him, resting a gentle hand on Daniel's shoulder. "Reading them over and over like that ain't going to help us find her."

"But what if they *are*, Abel?" He sighed. "I found them out on the bed, she must have been reading them."

“Her traveling trunk was open too, what if she took something... some money, maybe? What if she wanted to leave town because of these?”

“Well, you can ask her yourself once we find her,” Abel assured him. “But first we have to find her, don’t we?”

“So, quit your reading and saddle up a horse. We’ll cover more ground that way.”

“You don’t have to come with me,” Daniel murmured, tucking the letters into his pocket. “This is my problem, I should fix it.”

“We don’t know that there’s anything to fix yet, do we? Could just be she got lost out in town, or caught up talking to someone. Maybe she’s making some friends.”

“You don’t know that.”

“An’ you don’t, either,” Abel pressed, tightening his grip on Daniel’s shoulder. “If you expect to see the worst, then you’ll go around lookin’ for it.

“And if you look for too long, the worst is all you’ll ever see. So, rather than sitting here worrying yourself, get a saddle so we can get moving.”

“You *don’t* have to come, Abel,” Daniel repeated, shifting uncomfortably. Although he was grateful for the support, he couldn’t help but feel a little guilty at the same time.

If Lilly had disappeared because of something he had done, the last thing Daniel wanted to do was drag Abel halfway across town to help him clean up after himself.

“Nonsense, boy.” Abel smiled kindly. “We’re family. This is what family does, they help each other. And Lilly’s your wife, so she’s family, too, and I’ll treat her as such.

“Doesn’t matter that she’s from the other side of the country—she’s married to you, she lives on my land, so she’s my family. And that means I won’t sleep until we find her, you understand?”

Daniel shouldn’t have been surprised by the old man’s insistence. Since he had been a young boy, Daniel had watched Abel give everything he had to the people around him, even folks he didn’t much care for.

If there was leftover grain, or a ranch short of a few workers, he would always be the first to step up whenever he could.

He was a man who had taken in a stranger’s baby and his brother’s teenaged daughter and raised them as his own children, so of course he would help Lilly, too.

There was no sense in arguing any longer. They were wasting the precious little daylight that was left and it would be hard to track Lilly after dark, so, with a firm nod, Daniel agreed to head to the stables with Abel.

“Let’s go.”

When they reached the stable, though, they were surprised to see not one, but two horses already saddled and ready for a trip.

Further inside, they could hear someone moving around, and a few moments later, Andrew emerged with a third horse, also saddled.

“Evening,” he said quietly, inclining his head. “Jill told me about

the runaway.”

“She’s not a *runaway*,” Daniel murmured, feeling heat rise to his cheeks. “She’s just...”

“She’s just not on the ranch,” Andrew finished for him, passing over the reins. “I understand.”

“You’re coming with us?” Daniel asked, as Abel mounted one of the horses and Andrew followed suit. “You don’t need to do that.”

“You stop that, boy,” Abel chided. “You’re not forcing either one of us to be here, we *want* to help you. It’ll be easier to find her if you just let us.”

“Besides,” Andrew pointed out, “if you want to find someone, who better than me to help you get it done?”

Daniel sighed, tightening his grip on the soft leather restraints. Andrew and Abel were right, as much as he hated to admit it.

He needed their help to find Lilly, especially given Andrew’s tracking experience. His father had been a sheriff’s deputy, and as soon as he was old enough to put his feet in stirrups, he’d been begging to help hunt down fugitives.

The sheriff often ended up volunteering him when they were on the hunt for particularly dangerous men.

He couldn’t head out there and look for Lilly alone, and he knew that. Finding her was too important, and if he refused their help, it was all the more likely that he would return home empty-handed.

So, with a grim smile, he nodded his head. “Alright, we’ll go out

together,” he agreed. “Thank you.”

On their way out from the ranch, the three men stopped off at the main house for a few moments to explain everything to Jill.

At the realization that Lilly still wasn’t home, Jill looked worried, but she offered to stay back at the main house in case Lilly made her way home before the men found her.

With that, they set off in search of Lilly, but they didn’t make it far before something stopped them. Not far along the path, the men spotted something that looked like a crumpled piece of paper, and Andrew hopped down to pick it up.

“It’s a letter,” he called, passing it to Daniel. “Looks like it was addressed to Lilly.”

“To Lilly? No one’s written to her since she got here, who would —”

Daniel froze as he recognized the handwriting. He’d seen it before, he’d pored over it like a man possessed.

It was his mother’s handwriting, but it was in a letter he’d never seen before. Why would his mother be writing to Lilly, completely out of the blue?

*Utmost importance.*

*Grave danger.*

*An old well... Meet me tonight.*

*Come alone.*

“I don’t... understand.” Daniel shook his head, frowning. “The letter... I think it’s from my mother, but it doesn’t make any sense.”

“What does it say?” Abel asked, as Andrew pulled himself back up onto his horse. Daniel skimmed the letter again, but even on the second read-through it didn’t make much more sense to him.

“It’s saying that my life’s in danger, something about a secret. She asked Lilly to meet her on the outskirts of town tonight, she told her to come alone. But I don’t...

“Why would my life be in danger? How would my mother know that?”

Daniel passed the letter to Abel, hoping perhaps the old man would know a little more. “And if she knew something like that, why would she tell Lilly? Why wouldn’t she come to me?”

Abel read the letter, clicking his tongue. “I can’t say for sure I know. But if we want to find Lilly, I think we’d best start at that old well.”

With that, he folded the letter and passed it back to Daniel. “Lead the way, son.”

When Daniel was a boy, the old bones of the gold mines had been the stuff of ghost stories, used by the older boys to terrify the younger children of the town.

He had vivid memories of the story of a bandit who’d been hanged from the branches of an old tree near the well, who still wandered

around the hills years after his death, disappearing in and out of the cells of the abandoned jail at will.

Of course, he didn't believe in those stories now, but as he approached the well, he couldn't help but think of them again.

Had he even had the chance to tell Lilly about any of this?

He still felt like there was so much left that he hadn't had the chance to talk about, so many stories he hadn't had the time to share.

As they reached the well, Daniel only hoped he would still have a chance to do so.

"There's no one here," Abel murmured as the men dismounted, peering around for any sign of Lilly. "Where in the hell could they have gotten to?"

"There's horse tracks up here," Andrew called from a rocky outcrop that had provided a convenient space for teenaged boys to leap from if they wanted to scare younger children. "And some footprints."

"Footprints? How many sets?" Abel asked, heading over to join Andrew with Daniel close on his heels.

Andrew cocked his head to one side, straightening up. "Looks like just the one, but then the dirt's too dry for any really good tracks. Looks like someone was here with a horse, though."

"It couldn't have been Lilly," Daniel murmured. "She doesn't ride. I was... I was supposed to teach her."

“And none of our horses are missin’, anyway.” Andrew rubbed the back of his neck. “You’re sure this is the place the note told her to meet?”

“The old well, yeah. It’s the only one on this side of town, there’s nowhere else it could be talking about.”

“Maybe they met here and then went on somewhere else together?”

“Like where?” Daniel snapped, feeling his heart speed up again.

With every passing minute that went by without them finding Lilly, more and more awful possibilities of what might have happened to her swirled around in his head.

Any number of awful things could happen to a woman who had no experience out in a place like this.

“We’ll keep looking,” Abel assured him, landing a hand on Daniel’s shoulder and squeezing gently. “We’ll find her, Daniel. I promise you that we’re going to find her.”

“Hang on a moment.” Andrew held up a hand to get their attention before crouching by the side of the well.

He reached into the dirt and plucked something up between forefinger and thumb, blowing off a little of the stray dust and holding it aloft for the other two men.

It took Daniel a few seconds to figure out what he was looking at, but as soon as he did, he felt his stomach drop.

It was a bullet casing.



“It still feels warm,” Andrew said, pocketing it. “Which means whoever fired it did so recently, and they might be nearby.”

Daniel’s heart was in his throat. “Lilly—”

“Easy, boy.” Abel patted him on the back. “There ain’t any blood around, look. Now that means she can’t be hurt, so you just ease down a little.”

“Someone fired a gun, Abel!”

“It looks like they fired at the ground, meaning it was a warning shot.” Andrew folded his arms, looking around them for any other signs. “If anyone was here, it doesn’t look like they left of their own volition.”

*Bandits.* Bandits were well-known to prowl the outskirts of towns like this, picking on folks who strayed just a little too far out of the boundary of civilization.

It would have been all too easy for someone to see Lilly or his mother out in the middle of nowhere and take advantage of that. But if that had happened, where would they bring either woman?

*This is all my fault. Lilly never would have left town if she had felt as though she could come to me with the letters in the first place.*

*I didn’t talk to her enough, so she didn’t feel like she could be honest with me. If only she’d done that, she would never have had to come out here alone. What have I done?*

The world seemed to spin in front of him, moving in and out of focus. There was only one thing that he could concentrate on in that moment, only one thing that mattered—finding Lilly, as fast as

possible.

“Where could they have gone?” he whispered. “Where would they go? Lilly doesn’t know the town, the only place she’s been is the ranch, a few stores, and the station.”

“Well, maybe they didn’t head back into town.” Abel looked out to the west. “Maybe they headed further out.”

“There’s nothing out there, though, except for the old—” Daniel paused mid-thought.

A few structures were left standing out there, and he’d even told Lilly that on one afternoon that they’d spent together. Not much had been left behind after the town had relocated East away from the mining sites, but the old jail was still standing.

“Old jail,” Abel finished for him. “Perhaps they went there.”

“It’s worth checking.”

With renewed energy at the thought that he might be able to find Lilly, Daniel pulled himself up onto his horse once more and the group set west, into the quickly fading sun.

In the distance, only a dark silhouette on the hill, Daniel could make out the structure of the abandoned jailhouse.

**D**o I even want to know what's in there?

Daniel could have sworn that he could hear the blood rushing in his veins as they neared the jailhouse, closing in on the building that still looked imposing even all these years after it had been abandoned.

He wasn't sure what they would find when they got close, but there was a deep, nauseating sense of foreboding in the pit of his stomach that could only mean one thing—whatever was waiting for him probably wasn't good.

Would he find his mother there, after all these years? Would Lilly be there, and if she was, *why*?

Would he find bandits, who'd dragged her to the cells? Or would the jailhouse be just as empty as it had been for years now?

He wasn't sure which outcome would be worse.

The men dismounted a little way off from the jailhouse and crept up to the building on foot, careful not to make too much noise on their way up.

It didn't look like there was a soul around, and unless there were a group of horses tied on the other side of the jailhouse, it didn't seem like they were about to meet a gang. So who—or what—was inside?

As they got close, Daniel heard a voice, too muffled by the partially exposed walls to be identifiable. It sounded female. Was that his mother's voice he was hearing?

*I've heard that voice somewhere before...* Daniel thought as they came up on the building. He'd recognized the sharp, strangely high note, he'd had conversations with that voice before. Who did it belong to?

Abel realized who it was before Daniel did, and his eyes went wide with shock. "Missy?"

"Missy's in there?" Daniel whispered, peeking up to try and see into the old jail.

Sure enough, over the edge of one of the semi-collapsed walls, he could make out the face of Missy Miller. She was clutching something in her right hand, too, and as she spoke, she waved it about.

At first, Daniel wasn't quite sure what it was, but then it caught one of the last rays of light, and he felt the blood run cold in his veins.

It was a gun.

She was holding a gun.

Perhaps if he wasn't so terrified that Lilly was in the cell, Daniel

would have thought more rationally about his plan of action.

He might have been able to organize a surprise attack on Missy with the other two men, where they could disarm her safely and de-escalate things. Unfortunately, though, it seemed Daniel had *two* blind spots—his mother and Lilly.

He leapt up without thinking, yelling Missy's name and taking her by surprise, and she swung around to point the gun at him, letting out a shriek as she did so.

"Daniel?" she gasped. "What are you—how did you—"

"Where's Lilly?" he demanded, circling the perimeter of the building. Some sections of the walls had been destroyed by the elements, which gave him a good view of Missy, but no idea of who else was in there with her. "Bring her out, Missy."

"Daniel, you don't need to do this," Missy called to him, stepping out of the jailhouse.

She'd lowered the gun to her side now, and it hung limply as she smiled at him. "This is all just a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding? *How?!?*"

"She was never supposed to come here!" Missy explained, taking another step toward him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Daniel saw Andrew and Abel creep around the side of the jailhouse, likely trying to sneak around and find a way in. If they were going to do that, then he needed to make sure he kept Missy talking just long enough for them to find Lilly.

Luckily for him, it seemed Missy was desperate to explain away all of her actions. “Daniel, if she had never come to town, if she had never ruined our chances together, then my hand wouldn’t have been forced like this.

“Do you think I want to do this? Do you think I want to act like this? I don’t! All I want is for us to be happy together, but things just keep *getting in the way*.”

In his peripheral vision, Daniel saw something moving inside the building, darting past some of the half-destroyed wall. It moved too quickly for him to be sure of who it was, though, so he turned his attention back to Missy.

“Lilly never got in the way of anything. I thought I made things clear to you, I never planned on marrying you, Missy. I never wanted that for us, I thought I told you.

“Perhaps I should have been clearer, perhaps I should have been... sterner. You and I were never going to be married.”

“That’s just not true, Daniel.” Missy smiled, shaking her head like a child was trying to explain something to her. “It’s not true at all.

“I just needed a little more time to show you that we’re perfect for each other, but then she came here and she ruined it all! Don’t you see that?

“Now I’m getting rid of that distraction, so we can focus on our relationship.”

*Getting rid of her.* Daniel shuddered to think what that meant. “Where’s my wife, Missy?”

He realized just a moment too late that he had said the wrong thing.

At the word *wife*, Missy's expression morphed into an ugly scowl, and she let out a cold, sharp bark of laughter, shaking her head violently.

"No, no, no, no... Don't call her that. Don't... don't you call her that, Daniel. She's not your *wife*, she's *not*! She's a mistake!"

Her voice grew to a feverish pitch, taking on an ugly, shrill tone, and she lifted the gun again, pointing it at him. Instinctively, Daniel raised both his hands, feeling his heart race.

If he did the wrong thing and upset her any further, things were going to end badly.

Behind Missy, Daniel saw a figure emerge from the entrance of the old jailhouse, peeking her head around the wall, and at the sight of a familiar face, despite the gun that was aimed in his direction, he felt relief flood through his body.

He recognized that head of blond hair immediately—it was Lilly. She was alive, she was alright. He wasn't too late.

"Just end this, Missy," he urged, taking a step toward her. "Put the gun down, and come to your senses. How do you think this is going to end?"

"It's going to end with me getting what I want, Daniel." The gun trembled in Missy's hand as she spoke, and even as she threatened him, she didn't seem certain.

"Just put it down, so we can talk about this calmly. There's no

need for anyone to get hurt, alright?”

Daniel tried his best to keep his voice steady as he took another step toward Missy, trying to close the gap between the two of them. If he could get close enough, he reckoned he would be able to get the gun out of her hands without getting shot.

“I just want you to *love me*,” Missy whined, her hands shaking even more as she spoke. “Why won’t you love me?”

“Why would you pick someone you didn’t even *know* over me? If you’d just loved me the way I always wanted you to, none of this would have happened.”

“Easy, Missy.” Daniel took another step toward the woman, but as he did, something must have startled her—a noise, perhaps, or maybe she saw something out of the corner of her eye.

Whatever it was, she whipped around with a cry of surprise to see Lilly, still crouched in the entry of jailhouse.

Daniel wasn’t quite sure what happened next. He knew he was running for Lilly, he knew he felt as though his movements were painfully slow. He could see the gun in Missy’s hand, catching the light as she swung it around to aim in Lilly’s direction.

He had to reach Lilly before Missy pulled the trigger. If nothing else, Daniel knew he had to do that. If he didn’t...

*I have to save her.*

He heard a loud bang, a scream, and then the sound of two men yelling.



The clamor all blended into one cacophony as something hit him in the chest, and in an instant everything went black, just for a split second.

Pain exploded out from the middle of his chest, and then he felt an ache in his knees as he hit the dusty floor. The world seemed to go in and out of focus around him as he crumpled, struggling to catch his breath.

*What happened?*

*What happened to me?*

All he could do was roll onto his back, trying desperately to catch his breath, but even that felt like an impossible feat. His chest felt like it was on fire, and as he lay there gasping for air, Daniel heard someone yelling in the distance.

*Is that a man's voice? Is that Abel?*

It was hard to tell. The voices sounded muffled, like they were so far away, but at the same time it was too loud to have come from a distance.

Who were they? Who was yelling, and why?

*Lilly...*

Had he been too late to stop the bullet? Had she been hit? Was she hurt, was she dying? Why couldn't he hear her voice?

Desperately, Daniel opened his mouth to call her name, but all that came out was a low groan.

*Am I hit? Is that why my chest hurts?*

Slowly, Daniel reached up and touched his left hand to his chest, trying to feel for the source of the pain. It felt like a horse had kicked him and sent him flying, but when his fingertips brushed against something warm and wet, he realized what had happened.

Although he couldn't see what the substance was on his hand, he knew it had to be blood.

He'd been shot.

He was dying.

He was laying in the middle of the desert, out by the old jail that the older children had always joked was haunted, and he was dying. But despite that, as he stared up at the quickly darkening sky, Daniel realized he wasn't afraid.

He wasn't afraid to die out there and let his spirit become just another horror story to scare children, because if he had been shot, then that meant only one thing.

*Then she must be okay.*

"Daniel?"

Was that her voice, calling to him? It sounded like her, but perhaps he was just delirious.

Perhaps it was just his own foolish hope that the last thing he saw would be her. But then he heard it again, louder this time.

"Daniel?!"

A blurry figure hung above him, with blond waves that cascaded over her shoulders. His vision was too poor now to make out her face, but he didn't need to see her properly.

He'd memorized her face by now, he'd learned the contours of her nose and cheeks the same way he'd learned the curves of her handwriting in the letters she'd written to him.

He knew just from the color of her hair that the woman who crouched over him now was Lilly.

"Daniel, are you alright?"

*She sounds sad.*

He could hear tears in her voice, choking her up, and then he heard a ragged, desperate sob. She was crying, crying for *him*.

"Daniel please, please talk to me! Please be alright, please just—"

Lifting his hand felt so difficult that he may as well have been holding up a horse, but Daniel managed to bring his right hand up, searching for hers.

He didn't find it, but his fingertips brushed against soft skin, and then something wet. She was crying, he realized. Those were tears he could feel.

"Don't cry..." he breathed. "It's alright, Lilly. It's alright now..."

And then, he felt his arm go limp, and the world around him disappeared into darkness. The last thing he heard was Lilly's voice, begging him to stay conscious.

He wanted so badly to do so, but it was too difficult to hang on, even for her. He let the darkness take over as his eyes slipped shut.

One word followed him down into the abyss of nothingness.

“Daniel!”

**W** *e didn't even have the chance to buy rings.*

It was odd, but that was the only thing Lilly could think about as she sat silently in the kitchen of the main house, waiting for news.

Both her hands were folded together in her lap, and looking at them, she realized she didn't even have a wedding ring. They had planned, at some point, to go into town and buy them together, but for some reason, they'd never had the chance.

Jill was in the seat across the table from her, staring off into the distance with a blank expression.

Since they'd arrived back at the house, she'd tried to ease Lilly's worries a few times with a lighthearted joke, but there had been no confidence in her voice, and she had fallen silent quickly. She was too worried about Daniel to try and brighten anyone's mood.

There was still a little dried blood under Lilly's nails that she hadn't been able to clean off, no matter how hard she had scrubbed her hands when they'd returned to the house, and under the dim lights, it looked as though it had dried to a dark brown crust.

It was Daniel's blood.

She closed her eyes tightly, as if that would help matters. Perhaps if she couldn't see the blood, she'd be able to pretend none of this was happening.

None of those letters had ever arrived, she'd never gone out to meet the woman she'd thought to be Daniel's mother... Daniel was alive and well....

*Please, let him be alright.*

After Missy had shot him, and Daniel had collapsed into the dirt, the group had been quick to act. Andrew had wrestled the gun from Missy's grasp, all but flattening her against the dirt while Lilly and Abel had worked to try and help Daniel.

There had been so much blood that neither one was quite sure where the bullet had even struck him, but somehow they'd managed to stem the bleeding a little and get him back to the ranch. Even now as she sat in the kitchen, Lilly wasn't quite sure how they'd done it.

Abel had brought Daniel into his childhood bedroom with the help of some of the ranch hands, while Andrew had taken Missy to the sheriff's office, her hands bound to the saddle of his horse.

The last Lilly had seen of either of them was on the journey through town, as their figures melted into the darkness.

"She ought to be hanged," Jill said darkly, as if she could tell what Lilly was thinking. The two women glanced at each other from across the kitchen table and shared a grim look.

If Daniel were to die, it would be very likely that would be Missy's fate.

"I always knew she was trouble, but I never imagined she would do something like this. If I'd thought for even a moment that she was capable of something like this, Lilly, I would have told you."

"I know you would have." Lilly couldn't bring herself to say much more than that.

To speak felt like an exhausting, mammoth task, like her body couldn't do much more than worry about Daniel.

"Any other person would have... would have stopped once he was married. I figured she would see sense once you were wed, and she'd leave this family alone but..." Jill trailed off helplessly, shaking her head.

"It's not your fault, Jill," Lilly assured her quietly. "You weren't to know this is the way she was."

"I ought to have told you, though. I just never imagined she would cause trouble like this, and now..." She gestured to the floor above them, where Daniel was laying in his room with the attending doctor.

Lilly couldn't be certain how long they'd been up there, but it felt like hours. Every so often they would hear the creak of a floorboard above them as the doctor moved around, but other than that, the house was silent.

For a few moments, both women looked up at the ceiling, as if they would somehow be able to see what was going on inside the room, and then they fell quiet once more.

There wasn't much either one of them could say, and as painful as it was to admit, they knew all they could do now was wait for news on Daniel.

*I just wish there was something I could do*, Lilly thought bitterly, picking at the dark specks under her nails.

She wished there was *anything* that could take her mind off Daniel, but there was nothing. The only thing she could do was sit, growing more and more anxious with each passing second.

*Why hasn't the doctor come out to talk with us yet? Has he got no news to share? What if—*

Lilly's train of thought was interrupted by the crack of heavy boots on wood, just outside the door. The house was so quiet that the sound of footsteps was amplified, startling her and Jill, too.

Both women leapt up from their seats just as the door to the porch opened and an exhausted-looking Andrew walked in.

"Is there any news?" he asked, looking between them.

"Nothing." Jill sank back into her seat, her head in her hands. "I'm terrified to even go up there. This must be what Judgment Day will feel like."

Andrew joined the two women at the table, pulling his chair up beside Jill's. After a moment's pause, he laid one hand over hers and held onto it tightly, trying to comfort her.

"Daniel's a strong man. He'll pull through, I know it."

"He isn't stronger than a bullet," Jill whispered, sniffing. "God, I



wish I could see her just once, and show her exactly what I think of her and her stupid—”

“Easy,” Andrew soothed. “The sheriff’ll do plenty of that, don’t you worry. She won’t get off lightly, not after what she’s done. He reckons she’ll end up in the prison in the city.

“Of course, he’ll want statements from all of us who were there, so he’ll come around tomorrow or the day after...”

His gaze turned on Lilly, and he offered up what was probably supposed to be a comforting smile. It didn’t do much to ease her worries though, as hard as he tried.

“How are you feeling?” he asked her.

“Awful.”

Andrew swallowed audibly before nodding. “Yeah. I understand that. Where’s Abel, is he upstairs with the doctor?”

Jill and Lilly exchanged uncomfortable glances and shook their heads in unison.

When Abel had first brought Daniel into the house, he’d been his usual self—calm, collected, but ultimately completely authoritative. He’d commanded the ranch hands in his normal tone, telling them where to go and what would be needed for the doctor.

But then as soon as the doctor had arrived, something had changed in him. It had almost looked like he’d physically shrunk in front of their eyes, his shoulders slumping and his energy dissipating into nothing.

In a matter of seconds, he'd aged rapidly, like the fear over Daniel had turned him into a husk of himself.

He'd quietly excused himself from the house, and left through the back door. Neither one of them had seen him since.

"He went to the family plot, I think," Jill answered finally. "He looked almost ill."

"Family plot?" Lilly looked from Jill to Andrew, confused. No one had ever mentioned anything of a family plot to her.

"There's a spot of land on the north boundary of the ranch that he's given over for the family," Jill explained quietly. "He buried his parents there, my parents, too."

Lilly's stomach turned at the mention of a cemetery. Was Abel really so certain Daniel wouldn't survive the night that he'd gone to find a plot of land for him?

Was he already prepared to give up on his son?

It didn't take long for her to get an answer. A few minutes later, they heard the back door to the house open, and then listened as slow, heavy footsteps trailed through the house, growing louder and louder as they neared the kitchen.

Abel was back.

He looked nothing like the man who'd first greeted Lilly so warmly on her arrival. Pale and drawn, he was hunched over as he walked, as though he no longer had the energy or will to hold himself upright.

His eyes were rimmed red, and as he lowered himself into one of the empty chairs at the table, he couldn't meet anyone's gaze.

"Any news?" His voice was hoarse as he spoke, and cracked as he asked after the man who was, for all intents and purposes, his son.

Neither Lilly nor Jill could bring themselves to speak up, so Andrew did so in their place.

"Nothing yet."

Abel let out a trembling, long-suffering sigh and shook his head. "I always thought it would be *you* I'd have to worry about Jill, not him.

"You were always the troublemaker; I could always count on Daniel to have a good head on his shoulders."

The group all shared small, sad smiles as they looked around at each other. It was true, and they all knew it.

Quiet, rational and intelligent, Daniel was hardly the kind of man any of them would expect to get himself shot.

"Do you know he almost passed on when he was a boy?" Abel asked, his voice shaking. "He was only around a year old, and one morning when I woke him I realized he had this terrible fever.

"I bundled him up in my arms and took him into town to get help, and I barely slept for a week because I was so afraid something would happen to him."

"You never told me that before." Jill's voice was soft as she looked up at Abel, frowning.

“I suppose I tried to forget about it. It didn’t bear dwelling on.” Abel cleared his throat and wiped under his eyes before he continued speaking. “It was that day that I knew he was my son, when I looked down at him and prayed to God that he’d be alright.

“Some folks called me soft, taking in a stranger’s boy the way I did, but when I held him in my arms, just hoping that he’d have the strength to eat something, I knew he wasn’t a stranger’s boy anymore.

“He was *my* boy, my son. I swore then that I’d keep a good eye on him, keep him safe.”

“And you have done, Abel,” Lilly assured him, reaching across the table to take his hand. “You’ve kept him safe, and you’ve helped him grow into a fine man.”

“Perhaps.” The old man hardly seemed convinced by her words, but he accepted her hand gratefully. “I can’t help but feel like I failed somehow, though.”

“Don’t say that. You had no way of knowing what Missy was planning, none of us did.”

Abel opened his mouth to respond, but before he could, the group heard the creak of a door opening above them, and then footsteps heading for the stairs.

They leapt up in unison and rushed to greet the doctor as he left Daniel’s room, crowding around the bottom step.

Lilly felt her stomach turn as she looked the doctor up and down.

He was cleaning his hands on a rag, which was stained dark with

blood—and from where she stood, it looked as though there was a lot.

“Is Daniel alright?” she asked hesitantly.

“He’s weak.” The doctor paused on the steps. “But alive. It seems like the bullet was determined not to hit anything—it missed his heart and lungs.”

All four of them breathed out sighs of relief, and Lilly could have sworn she heard Abel choke out a cry. The doctor smiled down at them kindly and offered to talk somewhere more comfortable, where they could sit.

“He’s not completely safe yet, of course.” The doctor led them back into the kitchen, where he took one of the seats.

No one else could relax enough to join him, so instead they gathered in one huddled group by the table, clinging onto one another as they waited to hear him out.

“He lost a lot of blood, and it’ll take him some time to get his strength back. He’ll need a lot of bedrest and patience.

“There’s a chance he won’t ever be able to use the arm properly again, from where the bullet hit, so it’s possible he might not be able to work the ranch anymore.”

“Like that’ll stop him,” Jill murmured.

The doctor pursed his lips, and smoothed down his moustache with one hand. “Well, I’m going to have to make sure that it does.

“That bullet did a whole world of damage, even if it didn’t kill

him. If he works that shoulder too hard, it'll never heal right.

"I don't care how stubborn he is, you need to make sure he goes easy on it."

"Yessir," they chorused, like schoolchildren who had been scolded.

"Is he awake?" Lilly asked, wringing her hands together nervously. She was desperate to see him again, to make sure he was alright with her own two eyes. "Can we go up there?"

"I wouldn't recommend it. He needs a lot of rest, and I wouldn't move him from that bed for a few days." The doctor smiled kindly. "You must be Lilly. I heard Daniel got married."

"That's me, sir."

"Well then, I suppose I should be making sure you know all of this, since you'll be the one taking care of him."

"I'll do whatever I have to, sir," she assured him quickly. "All you need to do is tell me."

The doctor smiled gently.

"Well, for the time being, all that can be done is to keep him well rested and change the bandages regularly. Beyond that, you'll just need to make sure he keeps his strength up."

With that, he leaned back in his chair and let out a long sigh. "I'll stay for a few more hours to keep an eye on him, and then I'll head back to town.

"I just wanted to make sure you all knew how things are looking

for Daniel for the next few weeks.”

“Thank you,” Abel spoke up. “We appreciate that.”

When the doctor stood and returned to Daniel’s room, the group seemed to relax all at the same time.

Of course, they all knew there was still a danger that hung over Daniel—until he was back on his feet again, none of them would feel completely secure—but at least they felt as though they were in a better position than they had been a few minutes earlier.

Of course, Lilly realized as she eased herself back into her seat, that left one other problem. At some point, she was going to have to explain the truth to Daniel about the letters.

She hadn’t had the chance to do so at the old jailhouse, which meant he probably still assumed his mother had been writing to him this whole time.

*How am I supposed to explain to him that it was Missy, plotting something heinous against us both?* Lilly wondered, looking up at the ceiling as she heard floorboards creak above them.

*When he realizes his mother was never the one writing to him, it’s going to be so painful for him...*

Unfortunately, Lilly knew that she was eventually going to have to deliver that heartbreaking news.

**I**t had been a week since Daniel had been shot.

The words still didn't ring true to him, even though the slowly healing bullet wound in his shoulder served as a constant reminder of what had happened.

It just didn't feel real to say he had been shot, had very nearly died. Everything that had happened since the first letter had arrived felt like a dream—or, more accurately, a nightmare.

The smell of freshly cooked bacon drew him out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, where he paused for a moment in the doorway, smiling to himself.

This was what reminded him that it had all been real, and nothing that had happened was a nightmare. How could the scene in front of him be from a horrible, twisted dream?

Lilly was cooking breakfast for him, and even though the smell of bacon and coffee was mouth-watering, Daniel knew he would only be able to stomach a few mouthfuls of it.

A week on from the incident on the outskirts of town, he still had



no appetite, but that hadn't stopped Lilly from cooking huge meals for him.

Today would be no different, apparently—she was making up a huge feast that probably could have fed half the ranch hands.

“You know the doctor said I won't be able to stomach a full meal for quite some time, don't you?” he reminded her with a smile, still leaning his good shoulder against the doorway.

Lilly looked over her shoulder at him and rolled her eyes—clearly, she felt she knew better than the town doctor who had saved his life.

“How are you supposed to heal up on an empty stomach, hm? You need to keep your strength up if you want to get better, and the way to do that is a good breakfast.”

It was no use arguing with her. Since he'd been well enough to move from the main house back to their home, Lilly had taken on the role of nurse for him.

He would want for nothing under her care—she hung over him constantly, checking his forehead for a temperature, changing his bandages regularly, and of course, filling him with as much food as humanly possible.

“I don't want you wasting away,” she reminded him. “What kind of a wife would I be if I let that happen? You're injured, I need to take care of you.”

It was easier to just step aside and let her do as she pleased, Daniel decided. Her mind was made up—this was what she was going to do, and nothing would change her mind.

No amount of uneaten food would sway her, because as she pointed out, if Daniel wouldn't eat the food, then it would just go to the ranch hands instead. So even though he could only make his way through a few bites of food at a time, Daniel let her cook.

"Have a seat, this is nearly ready," she told him, motioning to the kitchen table. Daniel did as he was told, sliding into the unoccupied seat while his wife kept herself busy, making up a plate of breakfast for him along with a large coffee.

The plate of food was delivered in front of him—more than he would eat on a regular morning, let alone in his current state—and then Lilly sat down across from him.

"You're looking better this morning," she said with a smile. "More like yourself."

"I am?"

"There's a little more color in your cheeks, it seems like you're stronger. I'm glad."

"Well, you're feeding me like I'm a soldier about to leave for battle, so it's little wonder," he joked, stabbing at a piece of bacon with his fork.

Despite his jokes, he knew he needed to eat, if for no other reason than to make her happy.

"I just want to make sure you're alright."

"I'm fine," Daniel promised. "I'm healing well. And... I think I'm ready to talk about..."

He trailed off for a moment, and swallowed nervously. It had been a few days since Lilly had told him about the true nature of the letters, the lengths Missy had gone to to deceive him, and it still hurt to think about.

“I’m ready to talk about the letters.”

“You are?” She seemed surprised by that, not that he could blame her. He wasn’t exactly the most forthcoming of men.

Daniel tapped his fingers gently against the tabletop, sighing. Since Lilly had first told him about the true origins of the letters, he’d been struggling to come to terms with it, and he’d asked her to give him a little time to think about everything that had happened.

When they had first met, he had asked for things like that as an excuse to push the issue away and try to forget about it, but not any longer.

Now, a week later, he felt ready to talk about it. He *wanted* to talk about it with Lilly.

“I’m upset that the letters weren’t really from her,” he admitted. “But... not as upset as I thought I would be.”

“You aren’t?”

“No.” He smiled wryly. “You know, in a way I think all of this was actually a good thing, as strange as that sounds.”

Lilly cocked her head to one side.

“It *does* sound strange. Missy lied to you, she manipulated you, and then she *shot* you. I’m not seeing many positives to what we went

through.”

“Well, when you put it like that...” Daniel glanced down at his shoulder.

It was still heavily padded and bandaged underneath his shirt, almost immobilized by the doctor to prevent him from tearing the wound.

It would be a long time before he'd fully healed, and even then the scarring would serve as a permanent reminder of what had happened.

“But I think it's also made me finally see some sense,” he said.

“In what way?”

“My whole life, I was holding onto this hope that my mother would reappear out of nowhere and whisk me away. I wanted her to gather me up in her arms and apologize for ever leavin' me, and tell me that she'd always loved me.

“I don't think I even realized quite how badly I was pining for it until that first letter came, and then when I read it for the first time, I just stopped seeing clearly. I should have realized there was something wrong there, I know I should have.

“I should have seen how strange the whole situation was, but because I didn't want to believe it, I just... I just didn't let myself see the truth.”

He shook his head slowly, sighing. Even though it had all turned out well in the end, he couldn't help but feel guilty for how close he had come to messing all of this up for his family and putting

Lilly at risk.

If he'd been a little bit later to the old jail, or hadn't picked up that letter on the path out of the ranch, then there was a chance things could have gone horribly, horribly wrong.

"You want to know the worst part?" he asked, looking up at Lilly. "This whole time, I've been searching for the one thing that I've had this entire time.

"Ever since I was a boy, I've wanted a family, but I've got one already. It may not exactly look like everyone else's, but it's my family nonetheless.

"I've got Abel, I've got Jill, and now I've got you, too."

Daniel reached across the table with his good hand and took Lilly's, squeezing it gently.

"I was so convinced that my mother wanted to get into contact with me that I almost lost you, and I'd never have forgiven myself if that had happened."

"It didn't, though," she reminded him, knotting her fingers with his. "You found me. You saved me."

"Of course I did." He smiled gently. "And from now on, I'm going to make sure that nothing like that ever happens to you again.

"You're never going to be in danger, never going to feel unsafe ever again. I'm always going to be here for you, no matter what.

"I know given everything that's happened that might not be a great comfort to you, but... from now on, I'm going to do whatever I can

to make you happy here.”

Lilly ran her thumb slowly over the knuckles of his hand, and smiled at him. “I don’t expect you to do anything more than you’ve already done, Daniel.

“You gave me a new life in a wonderful place, you gave me a family. The only thing I can ever ask of you is that you treat me well—that’s all I’ll ever need.”

Daniel lifted her hand up and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “I promise you, I’ll do that.”

“Then I promise you I’ll stay.” Lilly leaned in closer and cupped his cheek with her free hand. “And I’ll never leave. I’ll stay and I’ll love you until my last breath.”

Daniel swore in that moment that he felt his heart flutter. It was the same feeling he had when he’d read the letter from his ‘mother’ for the first time: excitement, fear, and longing, all mixed into one.

In all honesty, he realized, it wasn’t ever his mother that he had been longing for—just someone who loved him, and who he loved in turn.

And he had that in front of him. He’d found that woman by pure chance in an advertisement at the back of a newspaper, on the other side of the country.

He didn’t need to go hunting for anything else, any other family—the only thing he would ever need was holding onto his hand, smiling at him from across the kitchen table.

“I never ended up getting you that wedding ring,” he said quietly,

looking down at her bare fingers. “Why don’t we head into town today?”

“It’s a nice day, we can go for a ride and get your finger measured.”

Lilly’s eyes almost seemed to sparkle as she beamed at him, nodding quickly. “I’d like that a lot.”

“I know you said before that a wedding ring is only a symbol, it isn’t the most important part of a marriage...” Daniel chuckled to himself, shaking his head.

That conversation seemed like it had happened so long ago now, even though it had only been a matter of weeks.

“But I’d like us to have them all the same,” he finished.

“That’s how I feel, too.” Lilly looked down at their hands before pulling hers away and leaning back in her chair.

“Having said that, we won’t be going anywhere until you eat something.”

“I’ll eat,” he promised, beckoning her closer again with one crooked finger. “Just come here first, though, just for a moment.”

Lilly leaned in again, cocking an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Just a little closer.” Daniel coaxed her in until she was leaning almost the whole way across the table, and then he stood up to meet her.

With a grin, he pressed his lips to hers in a kiss, and cupped her

cheek tenderly with his good hand. “That was all I wanted.”

Lilly giggled, bumping her forehead against his. “Well, clearly you’re feeling better already.”

“I am, and I owe it all to you,” he assured her, stroking the pads of his fingers across her creamy skin before he brushed a few stray strands of blond hair back from her face.

“My beautiful wife.”



## Epilogue

**I**t had been a while since Lilly had had the chance to sew anything from scratch.

When she'd first come to the ranch, she hadn't really been keen on the idea of getting back into sewing, after leaving a life as a seamstress behind.

Aside from darning socks and mending a few shirts, which she was more than happy to do, she'd mostly stayed away from needles.

But now, she had something to work on, and she was excited for it.

She was sat out on the porch steps of the main house, with a needle in one hand and a length of fabric in the other, taking her time as she stitched up the hem. After all, she figured she had five months to finish her new project, so there was no sense in rushing it.

"How's that going?" she heard a familiar voice off to her left, and looked across the porch to see Daniel coming towards her, smiling gently.

His hat was pulled down low to shield his eyes from the sun, but he swept it off his head with his right hand as he joined his wife on

the porch.

Lilly held up the garment. "It almost looks like a piece of clothing now."

"Almost." He chuckled, sitting beside her on the steps.

It took him a moment to ease himself down beside her, leaning heavily on his right arm, but he managed to settle his weight down and relax against the wood.

"You know, you probably shouldn't be sitting here in the sun. You need a good chair for your back."

"I like the sun." She shrugged before picking up the length of fabric and passing it to her husband. "Abel gave it to me."

Daniel's brows shot for his hairline as he passed the thinning cloth over in his hands. It was soft from years of wear and tear, worn out in some patches, and stained from a lifetime of being worn for working out in the fields.

It was a section of Abel's lucky shirt, which he'd proudly handed over to Lilly that morning.

"Abel gave you this?" he asked, surprised. "Willingly?"

Lilly nodded, taking it back from him. "He did, and he only had one request."

"Which was?"

"He said he wanted it to be kept in the family when I used it for something, but the cotton's not good enough to use for clothes.

“Instead, I’m sewing a little patch into one of your shirts, I’m putting a little bit on my apron, and I’ll give some to Andrew and Jill for their wedding clothes next month.

“And I was thinking the last section of fabric could go to making clothes for Abel’s first grandchild,” she explained.

Daniel grinned at that, and his gaze flickered down to her belly for just a moment. To a passerby who only glanced at Lilly, it might not have been obvious that she was four months pregnant, but Daniel knew his first child was there.

He smiled proudly at his wife before pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

“Abel seemed happy with it when I told him.”

“Where is he now?” Daniel asked, twisting around on the step to look back at the house. “I went into the office to talk to him but I couldn’t find him.”

Lilly smiled coyly at him. “He left about an hour ago, dressed in his best suit.”

“His best suit?” Daniel echoed knowingly, sharing his wife’s smile. “Well, well, well... I guess he has plans for this afternoon then, doesn’t he?”

Lilly giggled at that, shaking her head slowly. They both knew exactly where Abel was headed in his best suit—the same place he always was when he dressed well.

He was going to Majorie Frankston’s house in town, a trip he’d been making more and more frequently in recent months.

Whenever Lilly mentioned needing new fabrics, Abel would be the first to offer to make the trip into town to collect them for her—she was pregnant, he argued, so she shouldn't be making the trip herself.

There was no denying that Abel had another motivation to head to Mrs. Frankston's store, though, especially not when he came back without the fabrics Lilly had asked for one afternoon.

"I think they'd make a fine couple, don't you?" She smiled. "Perhaps he just needs a little encouragement."

"Mmh." Daniel stretched out his long legs, closing his eyes as he relaxed in the afternoon sun. "Maybe I'll talk to him about it."

They sat there together in comfortable silence for a few minutes, while Lilly worked on her new sewing project and Daniel looked out over the ranch that was soon to be his.

It was nice to see him like this, calm and relaxed in a moment of peace—they were few and far between on the ranch these days.

He was taking on the brunt of the business responsibilities at the ranch, as Abel was shifting into retirement, and while Daniel had always expected to inherit the ranch at some point, she knew it wasn't the way he'd ever envisioned.

His shoulder had never healed properly after everything that happened. Some days it almost seemed like he'd never been injured, but on days when his shoulder hurt, he could barely move it.

By his own admission he made a useless ranch hand now, so he and Abel had come up with a plan for the future of the ranch.

Daniel would take care of the business side of the operation while Andrew would oversee the daily goings-on, hustling the workers about and making sure every project was finished well.

That way, the ranch would stay in the family.

Daniel had taken to it quickly, learning the ropes with Abel. Next year would be his first harvest navigating the ranch alone, which meant that this year was all the more stressful.

He wanted to make sure he was perfect at his job before Abel headed off for retirement, but everyone had privately agreed that he was worrying about nothing—he would do a fine job in taking over after Abel was done.

It was hard to believe he was the same man she had married almost a year earlier. He seemed so different now, more confident and self-assured.

When they'd first been married, he'd struggled to sit in silence with her for more than a few minutes without shifting uncomfortably in his seat, worrying about filling the gap with meaningless chatter.

Now, though, he seemed perfectly happy to just sit and enjoy her company.

*I wonder how different I am from the woman who came here all those months ago*, she wondered, looking down at her husband.

She wanted to ask him, but decided it could wait. He looked so content in the sun that she didn't want to disturb him.

She set her sewing project aside and looked out of the wide expanse of the ranch, which stretched out toward the horizon until

it met the clear blue sky.

Even a year after moving out to be married to Daniel, she hadn't tired of the view, of the warm sun on her skin, of the fresh air.

This was the life she had wanted. This was the fairytale she had dreamed of in that tiny apartment in New York City, while she listened to drunkards yelling at each other in the alley below her building.

She'd wanted a family, and Daniel had given her that. He'd brought her across the country, invited her into his home, and given her a father figure, the sister she had always wanted, and a place to raise their children.

It had by no means been an easy journey, and Lilly would be the first to say that. They'd gone through more together than most people would in a lifetime, and Daniel would bear the scars of that until he was Abel's age.

A woman had been imprisoned, and Daniel had been forced to confront some of the most painful parts of his own history, but it was worth it for the life they were building together.

Of that, Lilly was certain.

## Extended Epilogue

**T**he ride on the long dirt road that led to the ranch was one Daniel had always enjoyed.

He could remember riding along behind Abel as a young boy, on the days where he'd followed the older man out to town, or to one of the neighboring ranches. The two would amble along the track on horseback, drinking in the sunshine as they talked.

When Daniel had been younger, the conversations had been about his schooling, or whatever had taken hold of his inquisitive young mind.

As he'd grown older, Abel had begun to teach him about the ways in which the ranch operated, preparing him for his work out in the fields.

Daniel could remember the pride in Abel's voice whenever he talked about the ranch, explaining the cycles that each plot of good growing land went through, or the best way to maximise the harvest.

Even as a young boy, Daniel had been able to see how much his surrogate father had adored the ranch.

Now that he was a man himself, Daniel understood that love. The ride up toward the main house gave him a chance to look out over the ranch that he had grown up on, the place that he was now inheriting.

Years after he had made this journey by Abel's side, Daniel could appreciate exactly what Abel had seen in this place.

It was almost time for the harvest, so the crops stood tall and proud in the fields as Daniel passed by. Some were too tall for him to get a glimpse into the fields, but when he paused to listen, he could hear workers in the distance, chatting amongst themselves.

Up ahead at the end of the dirt track, he could see the main house that he had grown up in, and then a little further off, the smaller cabin that he had built for his own family.

Although he couldn't quite make them out, Daniel knew the stables were just beyond that, and then the paddocks were just behind them. He knew this place like the back of his hand.

It wouldn't be long now until the ranch was officially his. This would be Abel's last harvest in charge of the ranch, and in the winter he was planning to sign off on the papers to transfer ownership to Daniel himself, which was an exciting prospect.

Of course, he wasn't going to be the only man in charge of the place. With his shoulder still not as good as it once had been, Andrew had stepped up, too—he could run the daily operations on the ranch, while Daniel handled the business side of things.

Judging by the crop yield they were expecting this year, it was a plan that was going to pay off.



As he approached the main house, Daniel jerked on the reins to bring his horse to a stop, and as he did so, he spotted a familiar figure making her way towards him—Lilly.

The swell of her now heavily pregnant belly was making her footsteps a little awkward and slow, but despite that, she seemed eager to greet him.

He'd been gone since the early morning for a meeting at Hutchinson's ranch, and from the gleeful smile on her face, it seemed she'd missed him.

Daniel had barely managed to get his feet on the ground before he felt her hand reaching for him, trying to hug him. Her belly greeted him before the rest of her, and Daniel couldn't help but laugh as she maneuvered herself to hug him properly.

He could have sworn her stomach was even larger than it had been that morning when he'd left.

"You're back!" She wrapped her arms around his neck, beaming up at him. "I thought maybe you'd run off to Hutchinson's ranch for good."

Daniel smiled and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. "And leave you behind? I'd never be able to forgive myself."

She giggled at that before motioning up to the main house. "Abel's in there, he said he wanted to talk to you once you got home."

"Yeah?" Daniel followed her pointing finger before nodding. "I need to talk to him about what happened with Hutchinson today."

"Well, don't be too long." Lilly kissed him on the cheek. "Dinner's

almost ready.”

“I’ll be there soon, don’t worry.” He pressed a hand to her stomach, feeling for any sign of their baby.

Lilly often complained about the little thing moving around, kicking at her stomach or turning over during the night, but right now there was nothing.

“How’s the little one doing?”

“I think they might be sleeping for now.” She grinned. “At last. I’ll head back in, and see you soon.”

“I’ll be right behind you,” he promised, smiling gently as he watched his wife go.

It wouldn’t be long now before they’d be looking down into the eyes of their child for the first time, and with each passing day, he grew more and more excited to meet them.

But before any of that could happen, he needed to meet with Abel and talk to him about the deal at Hutchinson’s ranch.

Daniel took off his hat, tucked it under one arm, and headed up the steps of the main house to look for Abel.

As usual, the old man was in his study, and when Daniel found him, he was leafing through paperwork. “Mind if I interrupt you?”

“I never do.” He gestured to the seat across from him, smiling gently as Daniel accepted the offer and eased himself into the leather chair. “You look tired.”

“Well, that’s because I am.” Daniel grinned. “I can’t believe you made this all look so easy when I was a kid.”

“Did the meeting go well?”

“He’s agreed to sell off a parcel of his land to us, in exchange for ten percent of the cattle we’re currently managing.” Daniel let out a low sigh and shook his head, still a little surprised that his plan had worked.

When he’d gone to Hutchinson’s ranch that morning, he’d honestly expected the old rancher would laugh him out of the building.

At first he’d been a little skeptical, trading off a section of land for cattle, but as Daniel had explained, the land was no good for grazing, and was sitting unused.

“You still haven’t explained what you’re intending on using that land for.” Abel cocked his head to one side. “Now the deal’s gone through, do you mind letting me in on what you’re plannin’ on doing?”

“I want to move the stables onto that plot of land,” Daniel explained. “Think about where the stables are now—they’re in a great position for crops.

“Hutchinson’s land is low-lying, and the soil’s worthless for growing anything, so we can build new stables there, demolish our current ones, and use the available land for new crops.

“I figure in a season or two, we’ll be able to make back any money we spend on the rebuilding. Of course, that depends on what we grow, it might take a little longer if we go for something that isn’t in demand.”

Abel nodded his head slowly, listening to Daniel speak.

“Well, I have to say, I’m impressed. I always knew you had a good head for business, but it seemed a shame to pull you out of the fields so that you could put it to use.”

“I was also thinking of offering some riding classes to folks in town, if people are interested. I’m sure Andrew would be more than happy to teach some youngsters.”

“I’m sure he would.” Abel chuckled gently. “And it’d be worth him getting a little bit of practice in with the kids before he and Jill start having some of their own, don’t you think?”

“Well, if that’s the case, he won’t have long to practice.” Daniel grinned. “I doubt Jill’s willing to wait much longer.”

“They’ve been married all of two months, I’m a little surprised she’s waited *this* long.”

“Speaking of marriage...” Daniel paused, tilting his head to one side. “It’s been a while since this family’s had a wedding, don’t you think?”

Abel tipped his chair back slowly, looking up at the ceiling above them. For a few moments, he fell silent, thinking about what Daniel was saying.

“I suppose it’s been quite a while, hasn’t it?”

“When do you think we’ll be having another? Soon?”

Abel laughed at that, and shook his head in disbelief. “Am I hearing this right? Are you pushing *me* to marry? Is this *my* Daniel

sittin' in front of me?"

Daniel felt heat rise to his cheeks at that. He had to admit it felt a little hypocritical to try and convince Abel to hurry along his wedding plans, after all the time he'd spent agonizing over his own choice.

But still, the older man had been courting Marjorie Frankston for over a year now, and the whole family was waiting to find out when he would ask her to marry.

Every weekend he would ride to her house for an afternoon meal before heading back with a small, almost secretive smile on his face, and it was obvious to everyone that he was completely smitten with her.

After years of taking care of everyone else around him, Daniel and Jill both agreed that it was good to see him finally going after something that he wanted for himself, in a way he'd never had time to do when they were children.

"Are you planning on asking her to marry you?" Daniel asked. "I know... you told me once when I was young that you never had any intention of marrying again."

"And that was the truth, back then. For a long time I really didn't see myself marrying another woman, and after her husband died Marjorie was much the same.

"But I suppose as you get older you start to look at things differently... I think I'm ready now. We both are.

"I'm ready to spend my days out on the porch, just whilin' away time and watching you boys take over the ranch."

Daniel grinned. “Really?”

“Really.” Abel nodded. “I’m actually planning on asking her soon, but there was something that I wanted to talk to *you* about before I did.”

“Me?”

“Mmh.” Abel leaned back in, and rested his elbows on the desk in front of him.

“I was thinking, now that I’m handing control of this place over to you, you ought to live up here in the main house again. Besides, with that growing family of yours, you can’t stay out in the small place you built, can you?”

Daniel felt his jaw go slack. This house was everything to Abel—it wasn’t just his home, but it was his place of business.

He’d raised two youngsters here, said his final goodbyes to his wife in the room directly above them. Daniel had always just assumed that Abel would want to spend the rest of his life in the main house, even if he decided to hand over the responsibility of the ranch.

“Abel, I can’t do that... I can’t have you live out in the house I built. You should stay here, Lilly and I are fine in—”

“This ranch is *yours* now, Daniel. That means this house is yours, too,” Abel interrupted him with that same calm, kind tone that he always used to explain something. “I’m more than happy to retire to the cabin.”

“That’s too much,” Daniel whispered, shaking his head.

“Is it?” Abel pushed his chair out, stood up, and beckoned Daniel to follow him.

With one arm around the younger man’s shoulders, Abel led him through the house that he had grown up in, out onto the porch that he had been left on all those years ago.

It was early afternoon, and the sun was still high in the sky above them, beating down on the ranch hands who were working tirelessly in the fields.

Off in the distance, they could see someone heading out to the boundary fence to check for any gaps, and from where they stood, they could just make out the sounds of the stables.

“This is your ranch, Daniel,” Abel said quietly, squeezing his good shoulder with one hand. “I always dreamed of having a son I could be proud to pass this place onto, and I have one.

“Truth of the matter is, there ain’t all that much else that I can teach you about running this place, and I think it’s about time I got out of your way and let you take over properly.

“Now, I don’t want you to think of this as a gift, because it ain’t nothin’ of the sort. You earned your place on this porch, my boy.

“You earned a seat behind that desk back there, and it’s time you take it.”

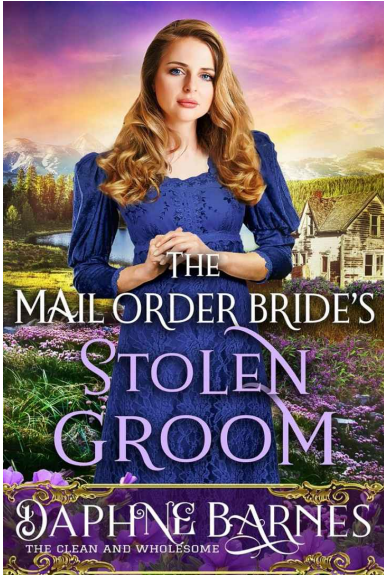
Daniel felt a lump rising in his throat at the words, and tears began to blur his vision. The ranch in front of him vanished into a haze of green, yellow and brown for a moment before he managed to blink the tears away, and wiped a stray one on the back of his sleeve.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Abel whispered. “You ain’t got anything to apologize for, especially not to me. We’re family, Daniel.”



## The Mail-Order Bride's Stolen Groom



## Prologue

**S***eptember 1893*

Tate Kinkaid stood in the back doorway of the saloon. He leaned up against the fence that divided the side of the building from the alley, watching as men passed through the door, in and out of the alley and bar.

Why his brother Duncan would choose to have a clandestine meeting behind the saloon with Ulric Veazie was beyond him. Ulric was a bad piece of business.

The fact that the two men were meeting up like this didn't look good to Tate and he huddled closer to the fence, trying to push the sounds of piano music and raucous bar patrons out of his head.

He strained his ears. It was difficult; he could just barely hear. He moved a little closer to where Duncan and Ulric stood, heads leaned in together, discussing something in low tones.

"That should do it. And if anyone gets in your way, shoot him."

Tate saw his brother step back, head shaking. "I'm not about to shoot anybody, Ulric. You said this was an easy job, one, two, three, and that's it.

“I didn’t sign on to get involved in dangerous shenanigans like shooting folks.”

“Do you know how many men, how many younger men, want to work with me, Duncan? I’m offering you this job so you can get back in the game.

“Nobody else is going to take a serious look at you,” Ulric said. “You remember the way it was when we ran this area?

“But you chose to leave, and I let you,” he reminded Duncan. “I trusted you to keep your mouth shut and never tell, and you haven’t. Now, it seems I can help you.

“I know you could use some easy money. Who couldn’t? But one of the occupational hazards of easy money, so to speak, is that you have to shoot anyone who threatens to blow the operation.”

Duncan was still shaking his head. “Look, I don’t want to rob the general store, Ulric. Mr. Wilson is a nice guy. Why can’t we take this outside of Great Bend?

“Every town has a general store. Pulling a job here is a little too close for comfort, wouldn’t you say? I mean, this is our hometown.”

“That’s the whole point, Duncan. If we hit a place in Great Bend, we’ll never be suspected. Sheriff MacGregor won’t even look at us. It’ll be an easy job.

“The only caveat is that we can’t leave any witnesses,” Ulric pressed. “Surely, you understand that.”

Tate turned away and leaned back against the fence, shaking his

head. His brother had never been cut out to be a common criminal.

Ulric, though, had convinced him that they weren't common at all. He'd succeeded in convincing Duncan that the two of them controlled Great Bend, North Dakota, and the surrounding countryside.

To Tate's relief, though, Duncan had been rethinking things as of late.

Tate had told his brother how foolish he was to risk ruining his entire life. Duncan was twenty-seven years old and still had a chance to make something of himself.

"Mmm, I don't know. I don't like the sound of it, Ulric."

"What do you mean, you don't like it? It'll be the easiest job we've ever done. Lickety-split."

"I'm not interested in pulling my weapon. I'm not in this for killing. Quite frankly, I don't want to be involved anymore. I told you I was out, and I am. I appreciate you trying to give me a hand, but no thanks."

"You're out?" Ulric's voice rose and quickly fell. The door next to Tate opened and music poured out into the alley as three men squeezed through and brushed past him.

"Yeah. You heard me. I'm out."

"Okay. I understand. You clearly don't have what it takes. I guess you shouldn't come here, then. Sorry to have wasted your time. I should have known you'd just back out."

Tate turned back so he could see the men and leaned in closer to hear their voices, which had grown more hushed.

It seemed Ulric wasn't done with his coercion. Ulric appeared to think his bullying might draw Duncan back into his plans for this robbery.

Tate waited, holding his breath. His brother wasn't one to get violent, but Ulric had it in him to do so.

But Duncan was, without a doubt, the better marksman. If Ulric handled himself in a poor manner, he might find himself injured.

"I never backed out on you, Ulric, and I'm not backing out now, either. I'm not joining you for this job because I have no intention of shooting anybody.

"If your grand scheme, your way of hiding in plain sight, involves harming others, I want no part of it. You hear? And no amount of your bullying or your attempts to demoralize me will change my mind."

"Be a coward. See if it matters to me." Ulric sneered.

Tate rolled his eyes. Clearly, Ulric thought attempts to demoralize Duncan were just what was needed in this situation.

"I'm not a coward, Ulric. You and I used to rob trains and stagecoaches for larks. But we were kids. No one ever got hurt or lost anything of great value.

"If you recall, I left the outfit when you started carrying more weapons than just your pistol. I figured out what your eventual plan was, and I saw you get sloppy because you started hiding

behind your guns.”

Duncan scoffed before he went on. “Your men got careless, too, and I wanted no part of it. You hear me? I still don’t want any part of it.

“A slipshod operation isn’t worth a penny. You’d best be careful to not get caught robbing the general store,” he warned.

“There are people in town who suspect you, Ulric. If you shoot anybody, you’ll lose the few shreds of respectability you have left.”

Ulric smirked, and Tate saw his teeth flash in the dim light. “I won’t get caught, Duncan, and you know I don’t care about respectability. Now, wish me luck and forget about it. I won’t be asking you again.”

Duncan pulled his Stetson down over his eyes. “Okay, then, but I’m not going to wish you luck, and I want you to realize this is the end of our association.

“Our friendship had been on shaky ground anyhow. Now, it’s done. I want nothing to do with you anymore. Do you understand me?”

Tate could hear the snarl in Ulric’s voice. “Oh, so that’s how it’s going to be?”

“Unfortunately, that’s the way it has to be,” Duncan replied.

“Okay, fine. Have a nice life, Duncan.” As Tate watched, Ulric mounted his nearby horse and rode off at a gallop.

Needless to say, it wasn't a surprise when Tate saw Ulric in the process of being transferred from the town jail to the train station. Ulric had been caught red-handed when he arrived to rob the general store with three of his men.

Of course, when the sheriff and his deputies arrived, Ulric's cohorts had disappeared into the night, leaving their boss to take the fall alone.

Tate and Duncan, along with half the town's residents, witnessed the outlaw as he boarded the train. For his trial, Ulric was being taken to a town where he wasn't well-known.

The townsfolk of Great Bend were in a festive mood. Ladies clad in silk dressing gowns with feathers in their hair stood on balconies and in their windows above the saloons, waving handkerchiefs and calling to the men on the road below.

Workmen from the train yard enjoyed their lunches along the boarded roadside walk, and men stepped out of the saloons, beer in one hand and a sandwich in the other, to watch the procession.

Here and there, children stopped their playing and the passersby ducked into doorways to get out of the sun and have a better view of their neighbor who'd turned to the criminal life.

Tate could see his brother was deeply affected by the sight of Ulric with his hands tied behind his back. The man glared at Duncan as he approached them, surrounded by the sheriff's deputies.

Ulric shook off the one who kept him in line and stepped up to the brothers. His face was about an inch away from Duncan's.

"You'll pay for this," he growled.

Duncan didn't flinch. "If you're suggesting I'll pay for your wrongdoing, you're sorely mistaken."

"You betrayed me, and I'll get you for it. You had best keep yourself up to date on the news, my former friend. As soon as I'm out of jail, I'm coming for you."

"You have no one to blame but yourself. Be a real man and take some responsibility for a change. If you'd have listened to me, you might not be in this predicament."

"You brought this all on yourself," Duncan reminded him.

Before Ulric could answer, the deputy nudged him with a rifle barrel. "Get back over there and move it along, Veazie," he ordered.

Tate watched his brother carefully. He had pulled his hat low over his brow. His eyes weren't visible, but Tate saw the clenching of Duncan's jaw.

He knew it wasn't easy for his brother to see the fall of a man who had once been a good friend.

"You'd best be looking over your shoulder, you hear me, Duncan Kinkaid?" Ulric spat on the ground.

"Move it along, Veazie," the deputy said threateningly.

Tate was tugged by a slight sense of guilt as the man was pulled away. Duncan and the Kinkaid's were the only family Ulric had ever known.

Now, they watched as he was led down the middle of Main Street,



an example to anyone else who might have similar ideas about robbing any of the businesses in Great Bend.

Despite Ulric's threats, it hadn't been any doing of Duncan's that had caused the sheriff and his deputies to be waiting for Ulric and his crew at the general store.

When the outlaws had arrived at three o'clock in the morning to rob the place, the sheriff had immediately taken Ulric into custody as the other gang members fled.

Tate had wanted to protect Duncan, but what was there to be worried about? Duncan always came out on top, no matter the situation. He would be just fine. Tate shrugged.

Things had been that way since they were kids. Tate's older brother had always been the shining example of the Kinkaid family.

He could do no wrong as far as their father — or their mother, for that matter — could see, and it had always left Tate in a state of discomfiture.

While he adored his brother and emulated him, he couldn't help feeling a certain amount of envy when he thought about Duncan.

Since they'd been children, if Duncan wanted something, somehow, he made it his, seemingly without even trying. Things he wanted just came to him.

It was hard for Tate, sometimes. Duncan was the golden-haired, smiling, charming brother, while Tate was the quiet, intense one, brooding and dark, that people often felt a little ill-at-ease around.

Tate didn't have a grin at the ready or the gift of gab. Still, he would do anything for his brother. Duncan had never been anything but wonderful to Tate.

He'd taken him under his wing, the way a big brother was supposed to. He'd protected Tate and made it easier for him in social situations by turning on his own substantial charisma to get folks to feel comfortable around his younger brother.

It wasn't that Tate had had a hard life. The two brothers, besides being close, were well-to-do ranchers, working alongside their father in running the massive Kinkaid Ranch outside of Great Bend.

It was hard work, for sure, but the two brothers were set as far as money and their futures went.

There had never been a reason for Duncan to get involved in the petty thievery he'd indulged in with Ulric. No financial reason, anyway.

He and Ulric had been young, wild boys looking for adventure. Except Ulric had been bitten by the excitement of it all — and the easy money.

Ulric had worked at the Kinkaid ranch since about the age of twelve. Tate and Duncan's father, Henry, had intended to include Ulric in his will — that was how close they had been.

Ulric had worked side by side with the brothers on the ranch and, as a result, had become something of a third son to Henry. On the night of Duncan's eighteenth birthday, Henry had hosted a dinner with the three young men.

Ulric stood to inherit thirty percent of the Kinkaid Ranch, while

Tate and Duncan would split the remaining seventy percent, according to the conversation that night.

But Ulric had thrown away his chance to be a rancher three times over. He had lived, rent-free, in the foreman's house on the other side of the ranch from the Kinkaid mansion.

One day, he'd started showing up late to work. Then, he began missing a day here and a day there.

Finally, he would just show up from time to time the way the transients did, looking for work for a day or two whenever he needed some money.

Once that became a regular occurrence, Henry had cut Ulric from receiving any of the ranch land or livestock. He'd provided the generous sum of twenty thousand dollars to be given to Ulric on the occasion of Henry's death, and that was that.

Ulric was out of the family.

Of course, Henry didn't have to make provisions in his will for Ulric at all, but he had a soft spot for his son's friend which had stemmed, in part, from the fact that the young man had no family.

As the years had gone by, though, Ulric had moved farther and farther away from the Kinkaid's and further down the path of criminal life.

Henry Kinkaid had cut the young man from his will altogether and no longer spoke to him. He'd advised his boys to do the same.

However, Duncan had still remained on somewhat amicable terms with Ulric and tried to help him out whenever he could.

Tate was in agreement with their father and, more than once, had nearly come to blows with his brother over Ulric. Tate had told Duncan, again and again, to just walk away.

But it wasn't until Ulric had talked about shooting whoever should come between them and their goal that Duncan had finally appeared to understand that his friend wasn't the same person he once had been.

The lure of danger and easy money had led Ulric to turn his back on those who cared about him. It had caused him to throw away his better opportunities.

"Are you ready to go?"

Duncan's voice alerted Tate to the fact that he'd been lost in his thoughts. "Oh, yeah. Let's go get a beer."

"Yeah." Duncan pulled his hat down over his eyes.

Tate hated seeing his brother in anguish, but he had to have known this day was coming. In fact, maybe finally getting arrested was the best thing that could have happened for Ulric.

No one had been hurt, which was a good thing. The store hadn't been robbed, and Ulric would most likely only go to jail for a year or two because he'd been suspected of robberies in other towns.

Maybe, once he was incarcerated, he would think over the mistakes he'd made. It still might not be too late for him to turn over a new leaf.

There were also Ulric's threats toward Duncan to be concerned about. A year or two in jail might only serve to fuel the embers of

Ulric's anger and resentment.

Tate didn't know what he believed. Was he just trying to convince himself that everything had ended up as it should have?

He wondered if it was really the best thing for Ulric to go to jail. Was the man capable of making good changes within himself?

Tate had thought he'd known the man well. He, Duncan, and Ulric went back fifteen years. All of a sudden, he felt a surge of guilt pass through him.

It was agonizing to see his brother in distress. Maybe he shouldn't have sent that anonymous note to Sheriff MacGregor.

## Chapter 1

O  
*ctober*

Naomi Danley carried the buckets of milk to the house. There were only two chickens and the rooster left, along with the cow and two horses.

They had to keep those animals if they wanted milk and eggs and a mode of travel this winter.

Since Naomi's father's accident two years earlier, things on the farm had gone from bad to worse. It had come to the point that fresh food was getting quite scarce.

Over time, they'd had to sell their four mules and the other cow to have money for the land taxes and for flour, lard, and a little meat. They had now resorted to eating from the vegetable garden kept behind the house.

There were no crops in the fields anymore. What they'd gotten had all been sold.

Naomi knew the money was dwindling and, so far, she'd had no luck in finding a job of some kind. Any kind.

With the holidays coming, though, she was confident that she'd find work as an extra maid. The rich families in Ithaca would be throwing big Christmas gatherings for their friends and families, and extra hands would be needed.

Of course, holiday parties were only a temporary fix for her family's plight. What was she to do in the way of work come February?

The idea of finding a man to marry intruded itself upon her thoughts, and she tried to put it out of her head. How could she find a man to marry her when she didn't even have a beau?

It was just the way things were for women. A woman needed a man to take care of her financially, and the more money the man in question had, the better off she would find her life to be.

Naomi knew better than to think she could lift herself and her parents out of poverty by selling herself in marriage to a rich man.

Her social standing would only offer her another dirt farmer like her pa — someone with a poor life, but a poor life that was a bit above her own. They would marry, have children and eke out a living, side by side, the way her parents had.

And, hopefully, when they became of the age her parents were now, they would have something more comfortable than the Danleys had. Something less harsh.

She stepped into the cozy, warm kitchen and her stomach rumbled and flipped over when she smelled the delicious supper her mother had prepared. She poured the milk into a clean, covered milk can, which stood in the cold corner of the pantry.

“Something smells delicious, Mama.” Naomi re-entered the kitchen and gave her mother a kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you, honey. Go wash up. I’m just about to put it on the table.”

Naomi left the kitchen in a hurry, nearly bumping into her father, who was on his way to the table. They both laughed and she told him she’d be right back and continued upstairs.

In her room, she poured water into the washbasin from the pitcher. She couldn’t help but notice her parents had been tense.

They were keeping something from her, and she could guess at what it was.

She splashed water on her face and dried it with a clean linen. Then she smoothed her hair, removed her dirtied apron, and headed back downstairs.

True to her word, Dorothy Danley had laid their meal out on the table — a loaf of fresh, warm bread, two pork chops, and what was left of the crock of baked beans they’d had the night before.

“Let us give thanks,” George Danley said.

When they’d finished saying grace, Dorothy slid the pork chops in Naomi’s direction. She spooned beans onto her daughter’s plate and put a thick slice of bread with lard next to it.

Her mother did the same with George’s plate. For herself, she’d reserved a couple tablespoons of beans, which she spooned over a thin slice of bread.



It didn't look like enough food for a child, much less a farm wife who'd been working hard since six o'clock that morning.

"Oh, Mama. I can't eat all of this. Will you help me and take my pork chop? My stomach has been sensitive today," Naomi said in her whiniest voice, hoping to sound convincing.

"I think beans and bread is all I can tolerate. The meat is too heavy," she insisted.

"Oh, well then, maybe your father would like it," Dorothy said with a smile.

Naomi narrowed her eyes at her father. She had to convey to him that her mother didn't have enough to eat.

He looked at Naomi strangely, as if he didn't know what she was getting at, but when she picked her piece of meat up with her fork and deposited it onto Dorothy's plate, he didn't say anything.

They ate with little conversation.

George was depressed, Naomi could tell. His injury prevented him from being in the saddle for more than two hours at a time, and that was pushing it.

Consequently, he was unable to go out on the farm every day, as the old injury would be exacerbated. He'd been working every other day for too long.

Hiring someone to work the land for them had been out of the question. Naomi and her mother kept the garden up all summer and had an ample amount of vegetables that they'd already canned and preserved, but they had nothing left to sell.

In spite of what they had, it didn't look like there'd be enough to carry the three of them all through the winter. And there was very little money to spend on supplementary food.

Naomi realized she couldn't wait for the start of the holiday parties to find work. She would need to go tomorrow and try to find something. Anything.

Of course, that something would involve domestic service, which ran the gamut of cleaning chamber pots to helping the lady of the house dress.

If Naomi could find a live-in position, she would have all her meals taken care of at the house she worked in. That would ensure her parents were well-fed for the winter.

Since the age of fifteen, Naomi had been picking up extra work as a domestic servant, but in the last two years, it had become increasingly difficult to find a steady position because she didn't want to live at her place of employment.

She preferred to live at home, but rich folks wanted their help on call at all times. That meant living on the premises.

The options for those living outside the home were limited, and Naomi was only called upon as a fill-in if someone was ill or extra help was needed.

When supper was through, Naomi told her mother she was feeling jittery and needed to work off her nervous energy.

"I'll clean up, Mama. You go sit with Pa in the parlor. Do you want a cup of tea?"

“That would be like Heaven on earth, my girl. Thank you.”

Naomi smiled and went about making tea for her parents, then took it to the parlor.

“Mama, Papa, I need to go into town tomorrow, early. If there’s anything I can pick up for you, just let me know.”

“You’re going into Ithaca? How nice. Why don’t you have lunch with one of your girlfriends, honey.”

“Oh, I might do that, Mama,” Naomi answered, as if that was indeed an option for her. There was no money to be squandered having restaurant lunches, but she played along as if their lives hadn’t irrevocably changed in the last two years.

“I’m letting you know I’ll be out now because, as I said, I’ll be dashing out right after breakfast.”

“Okay, honey.” Dorothy sipped her tea and smiled, while George already dozed in his chair by the fire.

Naomi wasn’t worried that her parents might ask her where she was going or why. Her parents respected her privacy and so, she would be able to go on job interviews the following day without them knowing.

It was a good thing, too. Naomi didn’t want to threaten the fragile pact with reality her mother seemed to have made. The woman went through the days as if tomorrow would be the lucky day in which all their financial woes would come to an end.

Naomi prayed that such a day would indeed come before too long.

The next day after breakfast, Naomi dressed in the better of her two skirts.

She had a dark blue one with a jacket to match and a brown one, also with a matching jacket. A vest in a brown, blue, and tan design could be worn with either ensemble.

The blue made for the nicer outfit.

There were four white shirtwaists hanging up, and she also possessed two dresses for work around the farm which she didn't keep in the armoire. Rounding out her wardrobe was her church dress which also doubled for festive occasions.

Most domestic positions supplied uniforms of black dresses with white aprons, and that was Naomi's hope for the job she intended to get.

The kind of job Naomi wanted least was a domestic position. But she had to do something to help her parents and, other than farm work, service was all she knew.

As it was, she felt like kicking herself for not looking for something sooner. But until her mother hadn't taken any meat for herself, Naomi hadn't been aware of just how bad their situation had gotten.

Being poor was one thing. Not having enough food was another. Naomi planned to find a serving position where she would live in, which meant she'd get room and board.

The board was most important. She wouldn't have her mother go

hungry for her.

Her hair was parted in the middle and pulled into a low bun at her neck. It was mid-September and still warm in the daytime and, after she was dressed, Naomi pinned her hat on.

She was as ready as ever. Her ensemble was simple, but clean and starched. She smiled at her reflection in the glass and went downstairs to say goodbye to her parents.

She would walk into town. It was only three miles away, but too far to let her parents know if she was hired on the spot. It was time to come clean and let them in on her plan.

“Mama, if I don’t show up for supper tonight, it means I got hired.”

“What do you mean, hired? Hired for what?”

“I’m going to look for a maid’s job, Mama.”

“A maid’s job? Why? You know you’ll have to live there. I’ll never see you. I remember the last domestic position you took.

“You’d come here on Sundays after church and barely make it through the meal without falling asleep. You were so tired. No, I won’t have it.

“I can’t have my girl working her fingers to the bone like that. You just stay here and help me if you want to clean,” Dorothy laughed, “I have plenty for you to do.”

“But we need money, Mama. I want to contribute to the household on a regular basis. It’s a necessity.”

“But do you really have to be a maid? There’s got to be something else you can do? What about taking in sewing? It’s a more genteel position.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking of what I can do to help out here. The general store, the dressmakers, even the saloons have enough employees.

“If the dressmakers don’t need help, a seamstress without a clientele or a reputation to speak of will be hard put to find clients.

“There’s just not a lot of work right now. Certainly, there’s not much extra work, except for the holiday parties.

“A lot of the people passing through town are staying for the winter and scooping up the odd jobs. I even asked at both hotels for work and they didn’t need anyone. In the summer, there’ll be work, but I need it now.

“If I don’t work as a maid, the only other thing I can think of — and I don’t like the idea one bit — is to answer an advertisement to be a mail-order bride.”

“A mail-order bride? Pshaw! I won’t hear of it. George!” Dorothy called for her husband to join them.

“Sh, sh, Mama. There’s no use in telling Papa, he’ll only get upset about it. Please don’t tell him, okay? Would you rather us have to sell the farm?”

“But I’ll never see you again if you run off to marry someone. Maybe your pa can talk some sense into you. I don’t want you going far away where I’ll never see you again.”

“You’ll see me again, Mama, don’t be so dramatic. Please! Marrying a well-off man will ensure that I’ll have money to send to you and Pa.”

The stakes were far better in answering an advertisement than in anything else she could do. She could find someone with a well-to-do life.

The West was full of men who’d made their fortunes. They weren’t afraid to marry women like Naomi... poor women.

Newly wealthy men out West didn’t think it would bring them down in the eyes of society to take on a wife from humble circumstances.

Many of those men had once been in the position Naomi was in. The West was a freer place, where pedigree wasn’t of the same level of importance as in the East.

“Do you actually think your pa is going to accept you... selling yourself in marriage, in order to help out on the farm? He won’t hear of it, and I won’t either. I mean it.”

“Why don’t we wait and see what happens today, okay? Maybe I’ll find something right in town.”

“I suppose I can’t stop you from looking in town now, can I? You’re a grown woman. I can’t believe my baby is twenty-two years old.”

“Your baby? Mama, you were younger than I am now when you gave birth to me.”

“It’s true. I felt so much older, though,” Dorothy sighed.

“Okay, Mama, give me a kiss and wish me luck. I have to get going. I want to get to as many houses between breakfast and supper as I can. I hope to be in town by nine o’clock.”

“All right, honey. If I don’t see you later, I’ll have a note from you tomorrow. Is that what you said?”

“Yes, okay. Bye, Pa,” Naomi called into the parlor and was out the front door. She hurried along the road that led to town. The walk would do her good.

She was angry. At everything and everyone.

She was angry that her mother hadn’t told her what dire straits the family was in. It was unfair of Dorothy to keep something so pertinent from her.

Their family had never been well-off, but there had been a few years when the farm was improving and the feed crop they sold was in great demand.

Then, a businessman from New York City had come to town and bought out five small farms that had been about to go into foreclosure. He’d had a meeting with George Danley, but George had refused to sell.

The man from New York had put in feed crops and sold them for less than George could afford to. Then, the taxes had to be paid.

Naomi seethed as she walked. It had been a downward spiral from there.

Now, she found herself in the position of most likely having to marry a complete stranger in order to take care of this year’s taxes.



And it angered her.

She didn't think it was fair she should have to move away and get married just because she was poor. But what else could she do?

If she couldn't find something today, she knew it was what she had to do.

She looked up, surprised she'd come the whole way. The outskirts of Ithaca were just ahead and when she got there, she ducked into a small shop that sold necessities for those just arriving into or leaving town.

She rifled through the newspapers. There was only one copy, but it was the current issue for September/October of *The Marriage Times*.

She paid for the periodical and stuffed it into her small carpetbag. Then she straightened her shoulders and headed for the first big house she saw.

Since she'd done domestic work in the past, Naomi knew to go to the back kitchen door to speak to the cook or the housekeeper, whoever was in charge. She knocked and was surprised when the door flew open.

"Well, it's about time you're here. The missus has been waiting since nine o'clock." The cook stuffed her escaping red curls up under her mop cap as she spoke.

"I'm sorry. Excuse me."

"Shush and get into the drawing room with you. She wants to talk to you now."

Naomi was pushed in the direction of two large, gleaming dark mahogany doors which were ajar.

A voice from the other side of them called out, “Are you there? Come in here so I can get a look at you.”

Naomi didn’t know what to do, so she walked into the room. The elderly lady that sat there eyed her up and down and demanded that she turn around in a circle.

“Hmm. You’re a bit on the thin side. Hmm. No worries. We can fatten you up. I don’t want the neighbors thinking I mistreat my help. Is that understood?”

Clearly, the woman had been expecting someone to interview.

“Yes, ma’am. Um...”

“Shhh. Let me look at you? Hmm. Do you have letters of introduction?”

“No, ma’am, I don’t.”

The lady of the house’s eyes opened wide. “You expect me to hire you without knowing anything about you? No, no, no. That is not how I do things.

“Katie Frances? Come and get this, this imposter out of here, will you?” She looked at Naomi once more. “You may wait in the hall.”

With that, she went back to her fancywork and Naomi backed out of the room and the house.

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